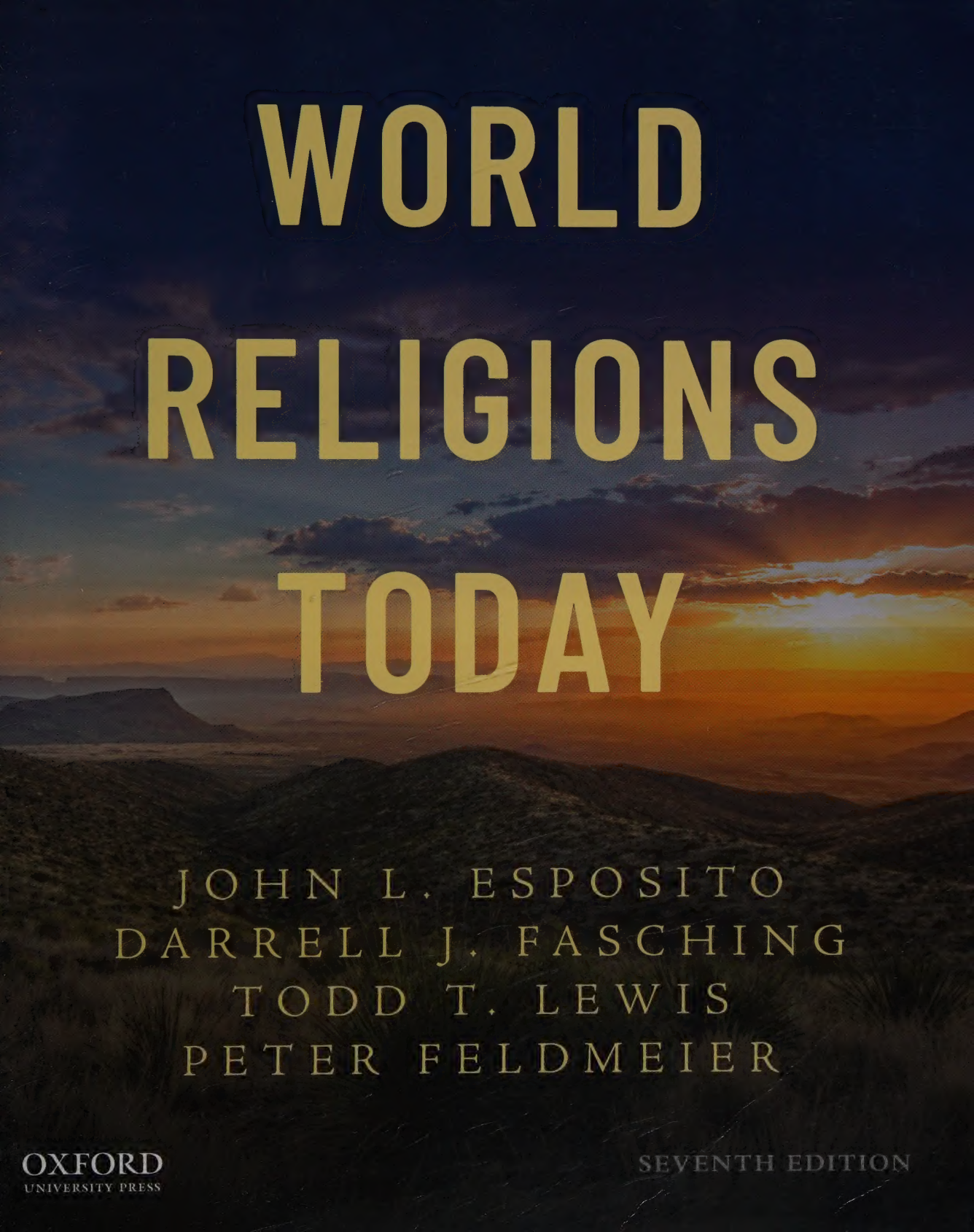
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# WORLD RELIGIONS TODAY

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*Seventh Edition*

JOHN L. ESPOSITO
*Georgetown University*

DARRELL J. FASCHING
*University of South Florida*

TODD T. LEWIS
*College of the Holy Cross*

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# PREFACE

Religion remains a premier dynamic in the personal lives of most humans on the globe. It is also a social, spiritual, and political force in the world today. In the past century, some scholars anticipated a progressive decline in religion and virtually equated modernity with secularism. What we have seen from a worldwide perspective, however, is that religion has continued to ground collective human meaning and has even displayed a robust resurgence. This seventh edition of *World Religions Today* addresses religion's various roles as that ground, including religions' interdependence with the cultures they exist in, their influence on and how they are influenced by political and social realities, and their philosophical and theological visions.

*World Religions Today* has a history. Its authors have had decades of experience teaching courses in world religions. We have garnered a seasoned sense of what works in the classroom and what does not. Further, we have all had reservations about many world religion textbooks. Too often, one finds these textbooks emphasizing the historical origins and doctrinal developments of a given religion, as though religion is relevant or interesting principally on that score. Many stressed a textual, theological, or legal approach, one that gave insufficient attention to modern alterations of these traditions. Of course, origins, texts, and doctrines are highly valuable and necessary. But our approach is to make sure students understand religions as they exist today. Our method emphasizes the tensions and possibilities of religions as people today negotiate the dynamics of modernity, globalization, and postmodernity. Thus, our approach gives more attention to social institutions and the influence of political power.

Despite the growing visibility of religion, the impact of religious resurgence, and the globalization of all the world religions, most textbooks have not quite caught up. *World Religions Today*, Seventh Edition, continues our hallmark approach of using historical coverage of religious traditions as a framework to help students see how faiths have evolved and become what they are now. Most chapters begin with an "Encounter with Modernity" section, where we give students several snapshots of a world religion as it exists today. Those snapshots reveal the tensions and possibilities that are inherent in any dynamic religion. And they do so in a way that reveals the larger, globalized tension between modernity and postmodernity. We show how each tradition has changed because of modernity, and also how each religion has influenced the contemporary world.

## NEW TO THE SEVENTH EDITION

The basic outline, format, and philosophy of this edition continue from earlier editions, though we have adjusted our categories and descriptions to better fit student learning. All of the material has been revised to reflect the latest scholarly research and ongoing historical changes at the time of writing. We have also relied on our valued reviewers whose wisdom and teaching experience guide our revisions. Thus, changes in this seventh edition include:

- edited and expanded chronologies
- more attention on lived experience in each religion
- dramatic revision of the Judaism and Christianity chapters
- significant updates to the Islam chapter, with sections on fundamentalism, reformers, ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Arab Spring
- significant revisions to the chapter on globalization and the dynamics of new age religiosity

## FEATURES

Each chapter is enriched by thematic and special-topic boxes that explore ideas or practices in depth. We are convinced that such boxes catch the student's attention and facilitate a deeper religious imagination. By standing independently, they are experienced as an integral part of the presentation while highlighting something particularly unique or thoughtful.

- "Gender Focus" boxes present additional information, beyond that in the regular text, about different practices of believers regarding their gender.
- "Rituals and Rites" boxes describe the main ritual practices of the given religion and what these practices intend in the lives of believers. Often, these boxes also highlight how such practices have changed over time.
- "Contrasting Religious Visions" boxes contrast the perspectives of two significant modern figures. Both representatives are devout and grounded in their tradition, yet experience or interpret their religion far differently from each other. One sees the plurality of interpretations of faith as well as how those interpretations have often led to either conflict or peacemaking.
- "Teaching of Religious Wisdom" boxes offer some of the primary texts and formal teachings of the religion.

- "Tales of Spiritual Transformation" boxes offer descriptions of religious experiences in believers' own words. Some of these are classical voices, and others are contemporary.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

**For the instructor**: Supplementary materials are available on the Oxford University Press **Oxford Learning Link (OLL)**, a convenient, instructor-focused, single destination for resources to accompany your text. Accessed online through individual user accounts, the OLL provides instructors with access to up-to-date ancillaries at any time, while guaranteeing the security of grade-significant resources. In addition, it allows Oxford University Press to keep instructors informed when new content becomes available. The OLL contains:

- The **Instructor's Manual**, which includes the following:
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  Chapter goals
  Lecture outlines
  Key terms with definitions
  Suggested web links and other resources
- An **Interoperable Test Bank**, including 40 multiple-choice, 40 true/false, 40 fill-in-the-blank, and 12 essay/discussion questions per chapter
- **Lecture Outlines** as PowerPoint-based slides

A link to the OLL is available on the Companion Website (www.oup.com/he/esposito-wrt7e.).

**For the student**: The **Companion Website** (www.oup.com/he/esposito-wrt7e.) includes the following student resources:

- Chapter goals
- Flashcard of key terms
- Suggested web links and other resources
- Self-quizzes, containing 20 multiple-choice, 20 true/false, 20 fill-in-the-blank, and 6 essay questions per chapter, selected from the test bank in the ARC

The Instructor's Manual and Test Bank, as well as the student material from the Companion Website, is also available in **Learning Management Systems Cartridges**, in a fully downloadable format for instructors using a learning management system.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Along with our own experiences and reflections, this seventh edition of *World Religions Today* has been significantly revised in light of the valuable comments we continue to receive from colleagues across the country who have used it. This edition is stronger because of their thoughtful comments based on their rich experience. We offer special thanks to the following professors and other anonymous reviewers:

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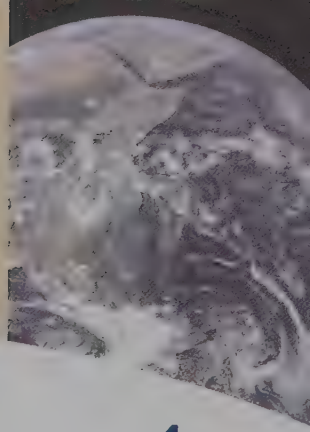


# INTRODUCTION 1

## Understanding World Religions in Global Perspective

In an age of **globalization**, human events reach through time and around the world to transform our personal, social, economic, and political lives. Until the modern period, the great world religions had largely divided the globe among them, with some modest overlap. But in our postmodern era, all the world's religions have members in every country or society. Just as Christians had migrated to every city in the world by 1850, Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are now found in significant numbers in all large American and European cities, and increasingly in smaller ones as well. Today, anyone using the internet can observe and even participate in live webcam services in major temples, shrines, churches, mosques, and monasteries anywhere in the world; devotees can offer prayers, order rituals, or make monetary offerings through their websites. This is globalization.

**globalization:** in terms of world religions, the idea that all religions have members in almost every country or society, and that technology affords access to all key religious sites, practices, and teachers

Essential to understanding globalization in the United States is the Immigration Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon Johnson. This act abolished the immigration system set up in 1924 and modified in 1952. The earlier system heavily favored immigration from Europe and severely restricted immigration from other parts of the world, especially Asia. The 1965 legislation dramatically changed the face of America. According to government figures, as of 1950 in the United States, about 3.6 percent of immigrants were from Asia; by the year 2000, more than 30 percent were.

In the 1950s, when people in the United States thought about religious diversity, it was limited largely to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. In the twenty-first century, the

◀ With the Space Age, awareness that all humans share life in a global village has come to the religions and cultures of the earth.

situation is dramatically different. Almost daily, the American media take note of new religious members of local communities—for example, a meditation retreat at a Korean Zen center in the suburbs of Providence, Rhode Island; the opening of an Islamic mosque in St. Louis, Missouri; or the dedication of a Hindu temple in Tampa, Florida.

Figure 1.1, compiled from Pew Foundation reports, census data, and other studies, approximates the number of adherents of the various religions found in the world today and their numbers in relation to one another. No reliable, exact count is available—or even possible—for many reasons: the lack of surveys utilizing the same criteria, disagreements about what is a branch of a world religion and what is a "new religion," and the paucity of thorough census/survey data from the world's two most populous nations, India and China. Existing surveys that summarize religious identity on a global level are extremely problematic due to these issues of definition, limited global scope, and affiliation.

Another problem exists, too: Central to any survey data is the assumption that a person can be listed under one variable and be only that, but such an exclusive choice of one and only one religion does not capture the reality of world religions today. (For this reason, the estimated percentages assigned to each tradition in Figure 1.1 exceed 100 percent.) Even among those professing to be monotheists, there are now many hyphenated identities, such as Buddhist-Jew, Zen-Christian, or agnostic-Yoga devotee. Singular identity is even more problematic for representing the religious reality of most people in Asia and the various indigenous peoples across the world, where many follow more than one tradition. Demographers too often give a false sense of certainty to the pluralistic and fluid boundaries of the world's religions today.

## Why Study World Religions?

In the emerging global economy, most neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools reflect this diversity as well. The beliefs and practices of world religions have become part of the mosaic of American society. It is more and more likely that our neighbors, classmates, and colleagues are ethnically, politically, and, yes, even religiously diverse—coming from many parts of the globe (see Map 1.1). Understanding diverse religions is necessary because it is now about understanding our neighbors. If we do not understand each other, our misunderstandings may well lead to prejudice, conflict, and even violence.

The academic study of religion is one of the newest disciplines in the modern university. Its beginnings go back to the emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, with the appearance of such fields as anthropology, sociology, and comparative linguistics. One of the great founding fathers of this comparative study of religion was the Indologist Max Müller (1825–1900), who argued that "the person who knows only one religion understands none."[1] It is only by studying the diverse expressions of religion throughout history and across cultures that we come to understand its unity and diversity.

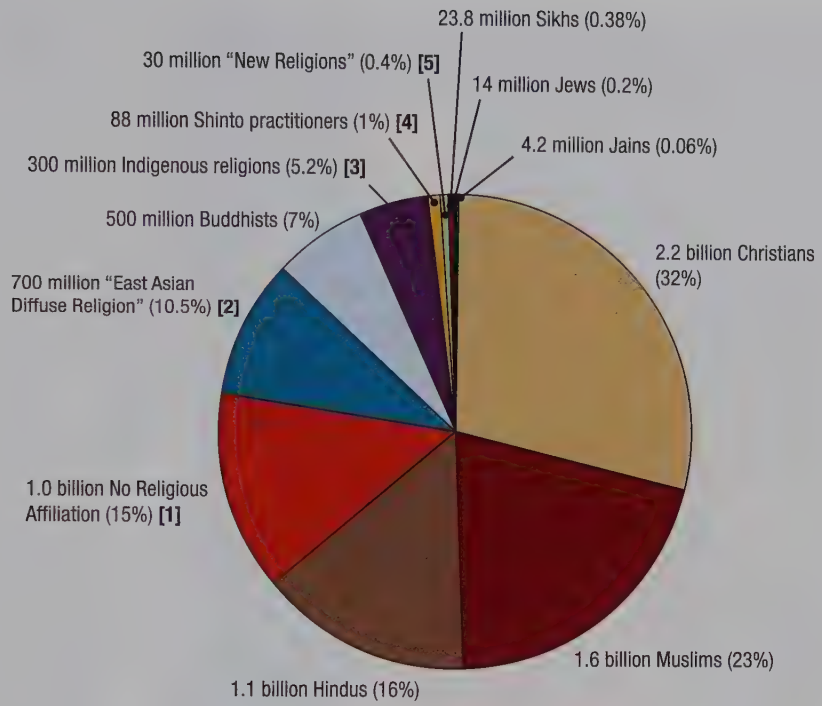



Figure 1.1 The world's major religions (percentage of global population).

**Notes:**

**[1]** Includes atheists, agnostics, and people who do not self-identify with any particular religion in surveys. Studies have also revealed that many of the "religiously unaffiliated" do have a set of religious beliefs. Some of the religiously unaffiliated, for example, do express belief in God or a higher power, a view shared, for example, by 7% of Chinese unaffiliated adults, 30% of French unaffiliated adults, and 68% of unaffiliated U.S. adults. Some of the unaffiliated also engage in certain kinds of religious practices. For example, 7% of unaffiliated adults in France and 27% of those in the United States say they attend religious services at least once a year.

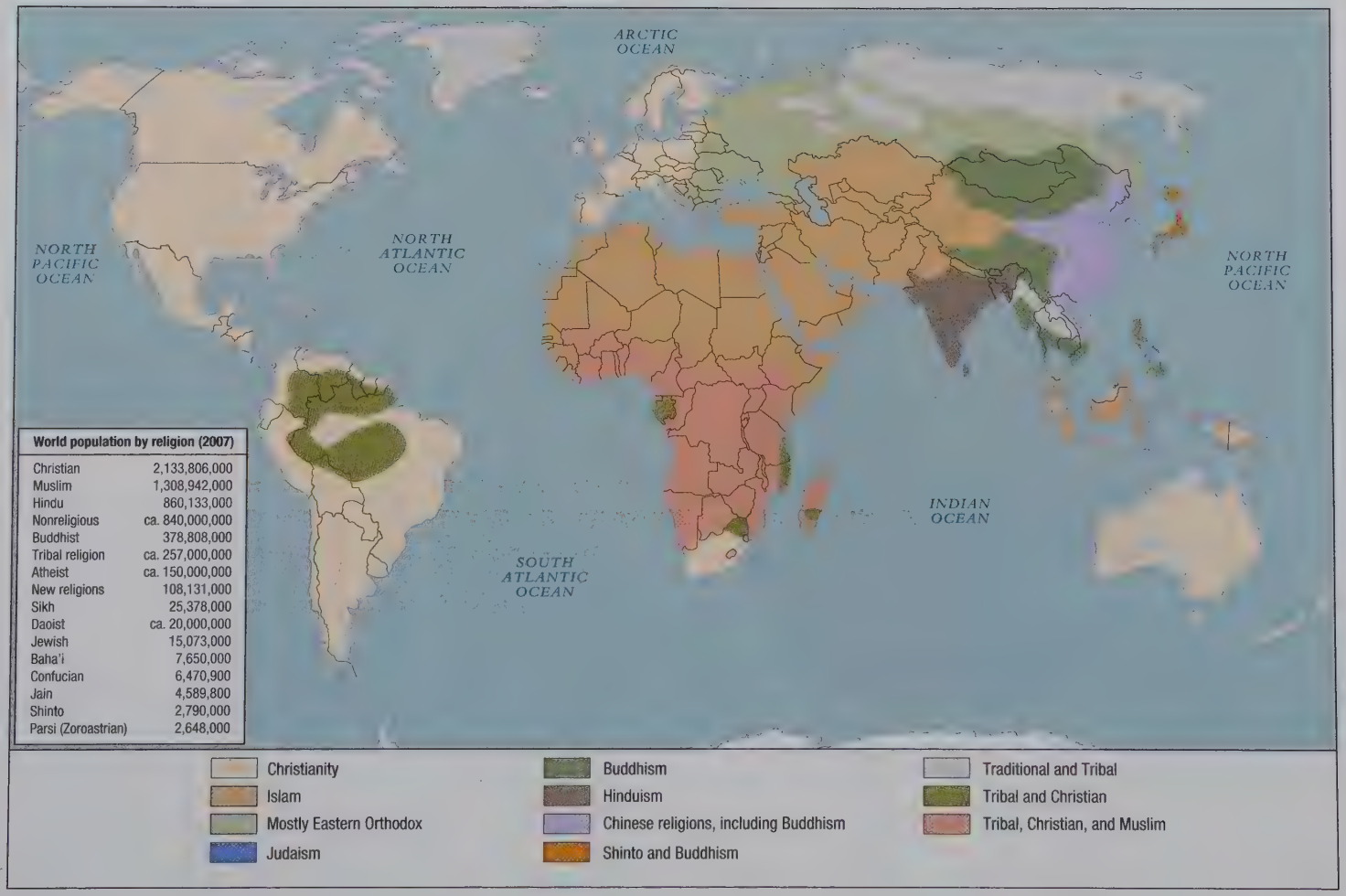
**[2]** A combination of Confucian, Daoist, and local religious devotions. This figure was estimated based on a Chinese government statistic indicating that 44% of adults reported that they had worshipped at a graveside or tomb in the survey year.

**[3]** Practice various folk or traditional religions, including African traditional religions, Indian tribal traditions, Native American religions, and Australian aboriginal religions.

**[4]** This number for adherents to Shinto in Japan is based on recent surveys that have shown that 80% of Japanese register their newborn children at a Shinto shrine, and that roughly the same number visit these temples on New Year's Day and other major traditional holidays.

**[5]** The formation of new religions has been a key hallmark of global religious life since 1750, and it has been recorded on every continent. Some have come and gone, such as the "Shakers" in Colonial America; some have arisen but declined so that to this day few devotees remain; most have arisen and spread in a particular region; a few have become global in membership.

Prior to the 1960s in the United States, one could not have studied religions comparatively in secular and state universities. Only religious colleges and private universities offered courses and degrees in religion, and the former were typically in the tradition of their own denominations. Then, in the 1960s, departments of




**Map 1.1** Distribution of world religions today.

religious studies began to appear in nonreligious colleges and secular state universities. Responding to the new diversity brought on by globalization, these departments began to offer courses on non-Western as well as comparative religions. What they attempted was completely new in history: They sought to understand and appreciate the diverse religious traditions of the world without preconceived biases toward any of them.

The academic study of religion requires the courage and compassion to empathetically understand the diverse worldviews of others and the willingness to learn from each. Its goal is not to show that one religion is "right" and all others "wrong," but rather to show what humans have found compelling in each and how each tradition has shaped history. The task in the study of world religions today is to overcome stereotypes and glimpse the wisdom found in each of these traditions. To judge another's religion without understanding both it and what it means to its members is to "prejudge" them—that is the meaning of the word *prejudice*. When encountering beliefs and practices we do not understand, it is easy to fall into the trap of ridiculing them, saying, "How can anyone possibly believe that?" Certainly, each of us wants to be understood and respected, not stereotyped and dismissed. We need to extend that same courtesy to all others as well. So in the academic study of religion, we agree to set aside our own beliefs and prejudices and try to understand and appreciate the meaning others find in their beliefs and practices.

In surveying world religions today, we shall not be able to cover everything that could be said about them. Our selection will be governed primarily by the following question: What do we need to know about the past to understand the role of religion in the world we live in today?

## Our Task

In this book, we focus on the diverse ways in which human beings have been religious in the past and are religious today. This is important since the last decades of the twentieth century brought a global religious resurgence. This development has impacted many aspects of contemporary life. The revitalization of religion defied earlier predictions that civilization was becoming more secular, with a worldview increasingly based on modern science. As a result, many scholars believed that religion would inevitably disappear. The ongoing clash of traditional religions with scientific and secular societies across the world is a major concern of this textbook. Every chapter thus begins with examples of a major controversy or significant tension each religion now faces.

We describe our present time as one in transition between "modernity" and a new "postmodern" era of globalization. To understand what is "new" about postmodernity, we first have to understand the premodern period of the different religious traditions and how the premodern worldview of each relates to and contrasts with the modern period. In particular, we will have to compare the premodern period in each tradition with the changes brought about by the "modern" era, which began with the rise of modern science and European colonialism after 1500 and declined after World War II.

In surveying world religions today, we shall not be able to cover everything that could be said about them. Our selection will be governed primarily by the following question: What do we need to know about the past to understand the role of religion in the world we live in today? To understand many of the conflicts that we hear about in the news, we first need to understand how religious traditions profoundly shaped the world to be the way it is today. Since religious beliefs are often at the center of the individual's identity, and because religious communities are major actors in our world today, studying world religions provides crucial insights for understanding our world. And to do that, we must begin by introducing some basic concepts.

## Understanding Religious Experience and Its Formative Elements

Wherever we find religious practice, we will also find certain key elements:

The Experience of Sacredness
Myth or Symbolic Story (typically embodied in sacred writing or *scripture* and expressed in a system of *beliefs*)
Ritual
Community
Morality
Religious Leaders/Experts

**religion:** the sense of being tied or bound by sacred obligations to powers believed to govern our destiny

Let us begin with a working definition of the term ***religion***. The word *religion* has its roots in Latin, the language of the ancient Romans. Although its exact root is uncertain, it is derived from two Latin words: the verb *religare*, which literally means "to tie or bind," and the adjective *religere*, meaning "careful or respectful [to the supernatural]." Religion is that part of culture that expresses our sense of being "tied and bound" by relations of obligation to whatever powers we believe govern our destiny—whether these powers are natural or supernatural, personal or impersonal, one or many. Because our word *religion* comes from the Romans, it will be helpful to understand their use of the word.

Imagine you were to ask a group of Romans in the first century CE, "What religion do you follow?" They would not understand the question. Now, imagine you were to ask instead, "Are you religious?" They would understand immediately. They might even respond, "Of course, but who isn't?"

In the first version of the question, the word *religion* is used as a noun. It suggests that *religion* is a social group to which some people can belong. This way of understanding religion naturally arises among monotheists, who by definition have chosen one god and excluded all others. However, the Romans did not have such a concept

of "a religion" followed exclusively and apart from others. In rephrasing the original question as "Are you religious?" you are no longer treating *religion* as a noun, describing something you join. Instead, you are treating it as an adjective, describing a way of seeing, acting, and experiencing all things. In many places throughout history, people did not think of their practices as "a religion"—a separate reality they had to choose to the exclusion of all others. Today in Japan, for instance, it is possible for a person to practice Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Shintoism. This may seem odd from the monotheistic perspective of Western religions, where one can be, for instance, a Muslim, or a Christian, or a Jew, but not two or more at the same time. And yet paradoxically, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all claim to worship the same God.

## The Sacred

Religion is about what people hold sacred, what matters more than anything else to them. For all human beings in all places and all times throughout history, religion has been about power and meaning in relation to human destiny, both personally and collectively.

Ancient humans believed that the forces of nature could govern their destiny. Why? Because nature was experienced as that awesome collection of powers that surround and, at times, overwhelm human beings. On the one hand, nature provides life and many of its necessities (food, clothing, shelter, etc.); on the other hand, nature may turn on people, destroying them through earthquakes, storms, or floods. Therefore, the powers inherent in nature evoke in human beings ambivalent feelings of both fascination and dread. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), a pioneer in the comparative study of religions, argued that the presence of these two ambivalent emotions is a sure sign that one is in the presence of the sacred. A defining mark of religious experience across cultures, these emotions are stirred by the uncanny experience of being in the presence of a power or powers that determine not only how well one lives, but whether one lives or dies.

Religion, as a form of human experience and behavior, therefore is not just about purely "spiritual" things. Nor can the study of religion globally be defined only by gods or God. People's religiousness has proven to be as diverse as the forms of power they believe govern human destiny. These powers have ranged from gods seen behind the forces of nature to the unseen ancestral spirits or spirits associated with sacred places; sacred powers can also be defined as impersonal sacred forces or energies, or even the mysterious power or powers that govern history. Hence, whatever uncanny powers we believe govern our destiny will elicit a religious response from us and inspire us to "to bind" ourselves to these powers through ritual. Thus tied or bound, we will act respectfully and carefully in relation to these powers, to ensure that we are in harmony with them. How do we know what our obligations to these powers are? Throughout history, this knowledge has been passed down from one generation to the next through myth and ritual.

## Myth, Scripture, and Beliefs

**myth:** a symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world

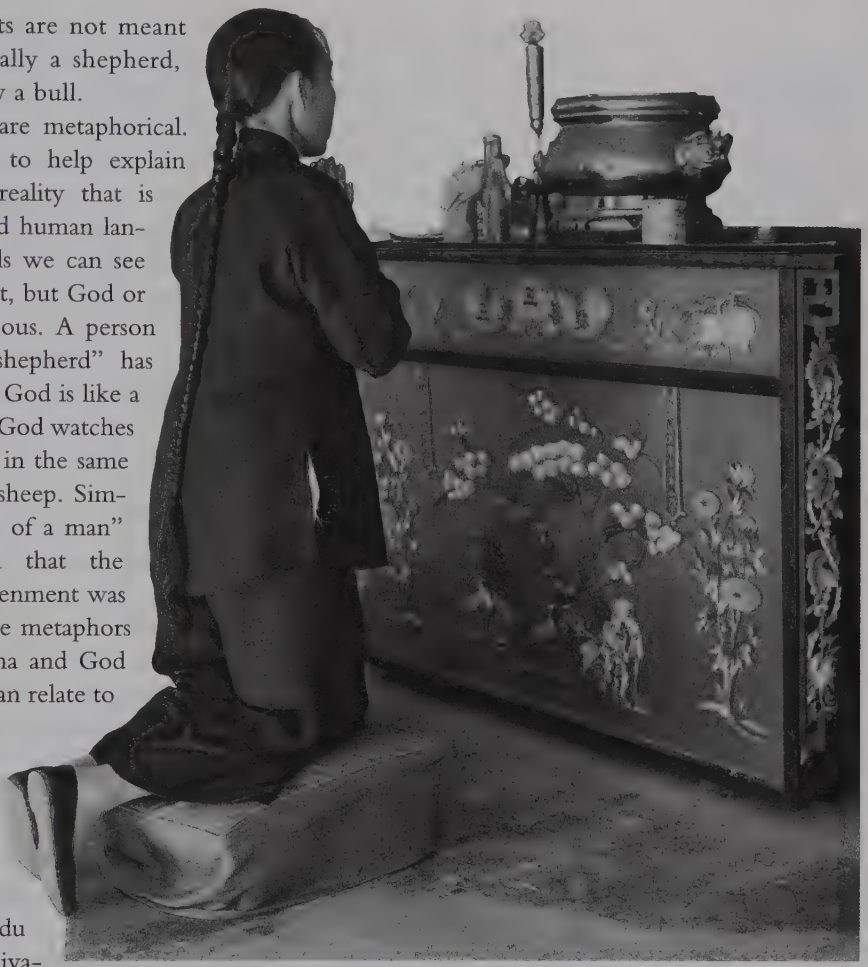
Our word **myth** comes from the Greek *mythos*, which means "story." Myth, we could say, is a symbolic story about the origins of the world and what determines the destiny of human beings. Myth "ties and binds" human beings in a relationship to whatever powers govern their lives, and it often explains what these powers require of them. Unlike the contemporary English use of *myth* to indicate an untrue story or a misunderstanding based on ignorance, every religious tradition uses myth to convey the deepest and most profound truths about life. These truths are expressed through stories of creation and notable human actions rather than in abstract theories. After the invention of writing (about 3000 BCE), these formerly oral narratives were first written down, creating what we now call the "scriptures" of the various religions. Because these texts tell the stories about the power or powers that govern human destiny, communities have treated them as sacred; they preserved and painstakingly hand-copied them to be passed down from one generation to the next.

For students of world religions, understanding the symbolic nature of religious language is a key challenge. To understand a religious story literally can often lead to misunderstanding its meaning and make it seem false. For example, in Western biblical tradition, the Psalms say, "God is my shepherd," just as Buddhist scriptures refer to their founder, the Buddha, as "a bull of a man."

A Shinto priest and believers purify their bodies in icy water for the New Year's ceremony at the Teppozu Shrine in Tokyo.

We know such statements are not meant literally: God is not literally a shepherd, nor is the Buddha literally a bull.

Statements like these are metaphorical. They use familiar things to help explain what is less familiar—a reality that is mysterious or even beyond human language. Shepherds and bulls we can see and know something about, but God or a Buddha is more mysterious. A person who says "God is our shepherd" has expressed the thought that God is like a shepherd, in the sense that God watches over and cares for persons in the same way a shepherd tends his sheep. Similarly, "Buddha was a bull of a man" expresses the conviction that the man who achieved enlightenment was strong and powerful. These metaphors both assert that the Buddha and God are realities that devotees can relate to and rely on.



To live well, have many descendants, and live a long life—these are three great treasures in Chinese culture. Here, a Chinese woman prays for prosperity, posterity, and longevity at a Buddhist temple on the island of Lantau.

Not all religious experiences are theistic, and not all religion is focused on a belief in God or gods. Buddhists in ancient India refused to use the Hindu word (*Ishvara*) roughly equivalent to the English word *God* to describe their religious understanding of the Buddha and the universe. Instead, they spoke of the inadequacy of all spoken words to explain either the flux of reality or their goal, the blissful state of *nirvana* (see Chapter 7). And yet they, too, used metaphors to try to help people understand what their founder had experienced as the "blowing out of the flame of desire," which leads to liberation from all suffering.

In fact, the word *God*, which is so central to the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), is just one of many diverse terms used in different religions and cultures across the world to designate the **ultimate reality**, that which is highest in value and meaning for humanity. This class of terms includes not only the personal God of Western monotheisms but also the impersonal world-spirit Brahman of Hinduism, the transpersonal nirvana of Buddhism, and the impersonal power of the *Dao* at work in all things that is central to Chinese religions.

**ultimate reality:** that which has the highest value and meaning to a group

**sympathetic imagination:** empathy; necessary to understand the religious languages and messages of different times and places

Here lies the challenge, mystery, and fascination of studying the religions of the world: Do differences in religious terminology reflect separate underlying realities? Or are they different expressions or ways of describing the same reality? Because religious metaphors come out of particular historical contexts, and because they are symbolic forms of expression, to understand the religious languages and messages of different religious traditions requires that we put ourselves in the time and place of their origins. We must use our **sympathetic imagination** to understand the metaphors. Different religious traditions over many generations have contributed an extraordinarily rich variety of metaphors to illuminate the mystery and meaning of human existence.

***via analogia:*** a way of explaining spiritual reality by using analogies from particular finite qualities and characteristics

***via negativa:*** a way of explaining spiritual reality by negating all finite qualities and characteristics

Religious language, as symbolic language, can take one of two forms: analogy or negation. The metaphor "God is my shepherd" is an example of the way of analogy (***via analogia***). In these metaphors, we use familiar words to create an analogy that describes something less familiar. However, there is another form of religious language, the way of negation (***via negativa***). This way of speaking religiously proceeds not by asserting what God or ultimate reality is (or is like) but by saying what it is not. This approach is very typical of the religious traditions in which human beings seek a direct, embodied experience of the ultimate reality. For example, the Muslim mystic declares that Allah is "nothing," stating that Allah (God) is beyond (i.e., transcends) or is different from anything in our material universe and experience. Allah is not this thing and not that thing. Allah is in fact no "thing" at all, being beyond all finite things and thus **transcendent.** So the best that humans using language can convey, without distorting the description of ultimate reality, is to say that Allah is no-thing.

**transcendent:** beyond all finite things

Western monotheism has emphasized the way of analogy by saying that there is one God who is like humans, able to "know" and to "love," but in a superior fashion. Thus, God is described as all-knowing, all-loving, or all-powerful. In this same way, some schools of Hinduism have referred to the ultimate reality as a cosmic person, or as a god with multiple arms and hands, rather than as an impersonal power. Asian religions also emphasize the way of negation, insisting that what is most valuable or true cannot be fully imagined. As the founding text of Daoism, the *Daodejing* begins: "The Dao that can be spoken of is not the true Dao." Both modes of expression are in fact found in all traditions. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mystics have referred to God as a "Nothingness," with Jews and Muslims unwilling to depict Allah or Yahweh in images.

Our discussion of religious language should help us to appreciate just how challenging it can be to study and compare various religious traditions. Just as religious communities and religious traditions from different parts of the world use different metaphors and symbols, they also mix the way of analogy and the way of negation. Therefore, two different traditions sometimes talk about the same human experience in ways that seem to be totally contradictory. For example, it may seem that a Jewish theist and a Theravada Buddhist hold diametrically opposed religious beliefs, for Jews believe in a personal God who created the universe and Theravada Buddhists do not.

Yet when we look more closely at Jewish beliefs, we discover that Jews believe God is a reality that can be neither named nor reduced to an image, just like Buddhists believe that ultimate truth is beyond all names and images.

After learning about the traditions covered in this book, you might conclude that perhaps theistic and nontheistic religious experiences are really not far apart. However, it is also possible that they might be seen as truly different. To pursue this great human question, we must begin by withholding judgment and simply try to understand how religions' stories and rituals shape people's worldviews, moral values, and ritual behavior. Perhaps the real measure of comparison should be how people live their lives rather than the apparently diverse images they worship or the concepts they might express. If both Jews and Buddhists, for example, are led by their religious experiences and beliefs to express compassion for those who suffer or are in need, then clearly the two faiths are similar in a very important respect.

## Ritual

**ritual:** actions that link the individual and the community in engaging with the sacred

**Ritual** actions, like myths, "tie and bind" the individual and the community to the sacred. They are transactions with the ultimate reality; across all traditions, rituals yield both transcendental blessings (related to salvation) as well as pragmatic, worldly benefit (health, prosperity). Typically, myth and ritual are closely tied to the major festivals or holy days of a religious tradition and illuminate the meaning of human destiny in relation to sacred powers. By celebrating a cycle of festivals spread throughout the year, people come to dwell in the stories that tell them who they are, where they came from, and where they are going.

Religious rituals recall important events in the history of each faith: the "Night Journey" of the Prophet Muhammad, the enlightenment of the Buddha, the death of Jesus Christ, the birthday of Confucius. In other rituals, the faithful offer gifts to the supernatural beings to whom they ascribe a power to profoundly affect their lives. Still other rituals require cutting off all the hair on the head, tattoos, or burn marks to set the believers apart from nonbelievers, fostering in-group solidarity. The consumption of certain foods as part of some rituals suggests that the believer can acquire the "same essence" as the **divine** through ingestion, as in the Christian communion, Hindu puja, or a tribal group eating its totemic animal. Ritual affirms common identity.

**divine:** the highest spiritual reality; representative of the gods

We should not assume that rituals only communicate ideas or beliefs, however. Religions are not confined to philosophical doctrines regarding the sacred. Rather, they include rituals that, in their own right, tie and bind people to each other and to cosmic meaning. Being religious thus entails taking decisive action at certain times while abstaining from activities at others. For example, at specific times, we may be expected to offer ritual gifts of food or fragrant smoke to supernatural beings; at other times, we must abstain from eating food (fasting). The ritual of pilgrimage guides devotees to travel, often at great distance, to sacred

**orthopraxy:** practice of "right actions" as prescribed by sacred traditions

**orthodoxy:** acceptance of "right beliefs" based on sacred texts as explained by religious authorities

**religious institutions:** A social organization designed to insure support for essential religious specialists, providing resources (financial, architectural, educational) to insure the perpetuation of a tradition

places for blessings; at other times, religious ritual requires remaining completely still (meditation).

For many believers, acting in the prescribed manner, called **orthopraxy** (correct practice), is more important than accepting the central doctrines set forth in texts and formulated by scholars, called **orthodoxy** (correct belief). Performing the five daily Muslim prayers, visiting a Buddhist or Hindu temple to offer flowers on the full moon day, cleaning a Chinese family's ancestral grave during the spring festival, or being baptized as a Christian—all these acts are as central to "being religious" as is adopting beliefs or doctrines defined as orthodox.

The great annual festivals in the world's religions give devotees a break from the profane time of normal working life. Providing a clear time to do rituals connecting with the ultimate reality, festivals reinforce important ties with family and fellow devotees. The need to orchestrate such crucial ritual actions leads followers to create the **religious institutions** that occupy central places in their societies.

## Comparing Religions Through Rituals

Recently, historians have shown that certain religious amulets were very popular among Christians living in eleventh-century Egypt, as seen in both archeological finds and popular texts. The most popular amulet worn by many Christians to safeguard their health was a "cylinder necklace" into which certain Bible passages or prayers were written and sealed inside. Other scholars working in the Middle East have shown that this necklace amulet was also being worn by Jews and Muslims, and modern scholars focusing on the material culture of Hindus in South Asia and Buddhism across Asia were wearing the very same amulet! Of course, the contents were different (Jewish prayers in Hebrew, Islamic prayers in Arabic, and Hindu and Buddhist mantras in Sanskrit). So in the year 1000, we had human beings across Eurasia doing the same ritual practice: having empowered sacred words written on a tiny piece of paper, inserted in a common piece of jewelry.

What is remarkable is that this same style of amulet is still available today across the world, with varying sizes, surface decoration, and cost. Of course, silver workers across the world have

Necklace capsule used by devotees of every religion across the ancient world to hold prayers, mantras, or sacred text passages. This protective practice and this type of simple amulet is still common today.

prospered for a thousand years due to this practice; those religious specialists who supply the empowered contents for a donation have benefitted from this tradition as well. In addition to showing the interrelationship between economy and religion, artisans and priests, it provides an illuminating insight about what is always a central part of religion: providing worldly benefits for believers.

In this textbook, we provide a holistic understanding of religion; the study of world religions therefore cannot be limited to what people believe, but also what people do (ritual and morality). Doctrine provides a shared belief system, but ritual is also essential for understanding the power of religion.

## Community and Morality

Religious leaders and institutions have passed down myth and ritual to shape communities that live according to the central ideas and norms of each tradition. Religion not only ties us to the sacred powers we believe govern our destiny, it binds us to each other. Consequently, in most religious traditions, ritual and **morality** have been closely intertwined. "Right" is often defined by "rite"—the ritual patterns of behavior that keep life sacred. Morality is an inherent dimension of religious experience, for religion not only concerns sacred powers but also describes the way of life to be followed.

**morality:** right action

The sacred—what matters most to a given community—is what provides the foundation for humans to live a virtuous life. The blueprint for what is just or moral has its roots in myths and rituals, as interpreted by generations of religious authorities. Take, for example, the Jewish festival of Yom Kippur. Showing gratitude for God's forgiveness, this is the beginning of a new year when each person should fast, repent, seek forgiveness for the times one has harmed others, and offer forgiveness to others. Each person should also resolve to live more compassionately and justly in the new year.

Once we realize that religion is about what people hold sacred and the way of life that is called for by such beliefs, it then makes sense to say that all morality has a religious dimension. In this way, even the morality of atheists or agnostics, who may not think of themselves as "religious," can be said to have a religious dimension—at least to the degree that certain ethical principles are held sacred.

A Tlingit shaman performs healing ceremony.

## Religious Leaders/Experts

In every religion, we will find specialists—shamans, priests, ministers, monks, rabbis, scholars, and *ulama* (Muslim teachers)—who mediate between the sacred power(s) and the community by explaining the myths and performing the rituals. The world's oldest religious specialist is the shaman, a man or woman who goes into a trance to communicate with sacred ancestors and supernatural beings (spirits, gods, demons, ghosts, etc.). Practitioners of this art (also called mediums or oracles) are depicted on cave walls across Eurasia from the Neolithic period 25,000 years ago. Shamans still exist in many parts of the world, not only among indigenous peoples but also within or alongside the great world religions (see Chapter 2).

Since the invention of writing in 3000 BCE, the great world religions have relied on written materials and on scholars who have learned to write and read and thereby interpret the sacred texts. These keepers of the sacred writings had to convey their meanings for the great majority of followers, most of whom, until the modern era, were illiterate. The Confucian masters, the Muslim ulama, and the Hindu brahmin are examples of this religious specialist. And then there are those who specialize in being spiritual teachers, such as the Hindu guru, the Jewish rabbi, or the Sufi Muslim *shaykh*. Although we can point to interesting comparative patterns among religious rituals and between religious teachers, it is also true that each tradition can and must be known by its own unique set of religious practitioners and institutions.

A two-year-old Muslim boy, living in predominantly Catholic East Timor, prays alongside his father at a mosque in Dili.

# The Great Religious Stories of the World

As human beings, we are not just "story tellers": We are "story dwellers." Humans live in our stories and make sense of the world through them. Even our understanding of what is good and evil is shaped by the kind of story we see ourselves in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story. Although not all religious myths are stories only about gods, spiritual beings, and humans, most of them have been.

There are four main types of religious stories, each of which presents a symbolic story of the origins and destiny of human beings and the challenges they face in striving to realize their sacred destiny. (Consult Figure 1.2, the "World Religions in Perspective" chart, when reading this section.) These four main types of sacred story are:

myths of nature
myths of harmony
myths of liberation
myths of history

## The Myths of Nature

The earliest religious stories are myths of nature. These are stories about the powers of nature that are central to human destiny and portray them as either personal beings (gods, spirits, and sacred ancestors) or impersonal powers. Such religions tend to see time as cyclical, always returning to the moment right before creation. Just as winter and death are followed by spring and new life, starting the earthly cycles all over again, time is an endless loop. Myth and ritual are the means to erase the distance between "now" and the time of origins, "in the beginning," when the gods or ancestral spirits first created the world. In such stories, the problem of life is time: Its passage inevitably brings sickness, decline, and death. The ideal of human life in the myths of nature is to return to the newness of life at the beginning of creation, before time began.

The means for bringing about this return is the recitation of the myths and the performance of rituals reenacting creation. Hunter-gatherer stories emphasize the fertility of the earth, the sacred relations with animals and plants, the need for the ritual renewal of life in harmony with the seasons, and the role the tribe plays in maintaining the eternal cosmic order. In many of these societies, a shaman is the spiritual leader; as will be seen in Chapter 2, the shaman's trance journeys can restore harmony between the human community, spirits, and the forces of nature.

## China and the Myths of Harmony

In China, the great cosmic story was that of the Dao (sometimes rendered Tao). The universal Dao, which all beings share, is the source of harmony in the universe.

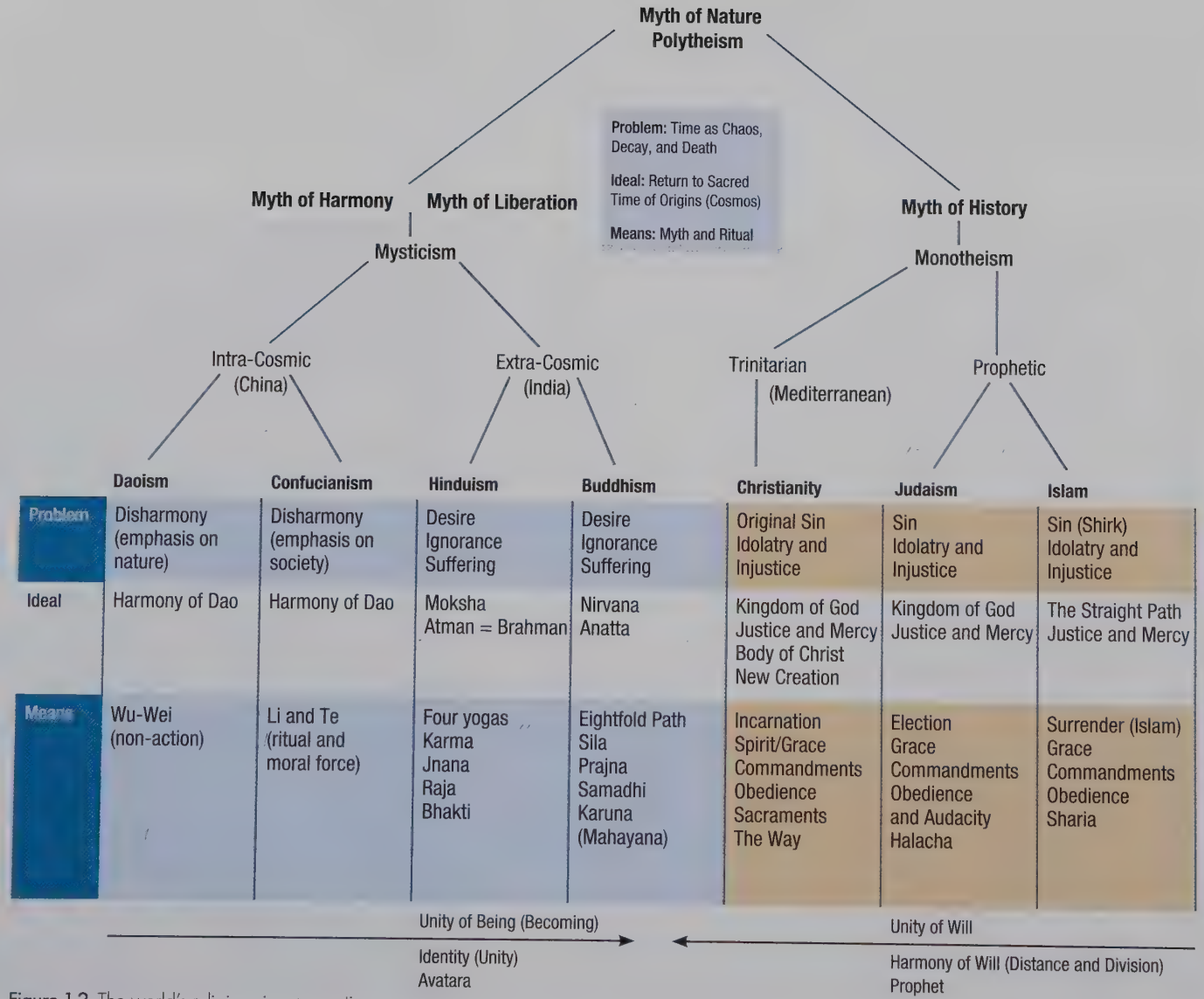



Figure 1.2 The world's religions in perspective.

The Dao is at work, hidden in all the forces of nature. One's true self is knowable only in relation to the Dao. All of creation works through combinations of complementary opposites of *yin* and *yang*, of dark and light, of earth and heaven, of female and male. But yin and yang are never polar opposites; rather, each flows into the other with no absolute division, the way day flows into night and night into day. The ideal for human life, then, is balance and harmony. The great problem of existence is the disharmony that occurs when the elements of self, society, and/or the universe are out of balance.

To restore balance, two different religions emerged in China: Daoism and Confucianism. Both sought to bring harmony between heaven and earth, self and society. Yet these two traditions offered very different means to overcome the problem and realize the ideal. Daoist sages urged humans to seek harmony with the rhythms of nature through cultivating *wu-wei*, the art of "not doing," or not interfering with the flow of life in nature. By contrast, the Confucian sages urged humans to establish harmony in society through the practice of *li*, the rituals and customs that fulfill obligations to kin, community, and ruler based upon one's station in society. By cultivating their character, they sacrifice their self-interest for the good of the whole society.

## India and the Myths of Liberation

In ancient India, life was also seen in relation to the cycles of existence. Its priests enacted powerful rituals to control the gods affecting human life, from the weather to personal fortune and group destiny. But in India, these rhythms were ultimately to be escaped, not affirmed. Human existence was seen as ultimately unsatisfactory not because there is nothing good about life but because it is transient and always ends in old age, sickness, and death. The problem of life is human entrapment in an endless cycle of suffering and rebirth, so the highest goal was to overcome this bondage. Thus, the great religions originating in India all seek to destroy the delusions fostered by selfish desires, for only when these are mastered can humans be freed from the wheel of death and rebirth. A host of spiritual traditions discovered by the sages have shown many paths to salvation, the blissful liberation from rebirth.

Hinduism and Buddhism developed a variety of means, called *yogas*, for achieving liberation or enlightenment. These range from disciplined ritual activity and the selfless performance of one's duties to seeking spiritual knowledge through meditation or cultivating selfless devotion toward a particular god or goddess.

## The Middle East and the Myths of History

The myths of nature, of harmony, and of liberation use the human experience of the rhythms and cycles of nature as the basis for religious metaphors and symbolic language expressed in sacred stories. In the myths of history, by contrast, it is not nature but human history from which the metaphors for religious experience are primarily drawn. While all religions communicate their traditions by telling stories, only the

Hindu women pay homage to the god of the sun during the Chat Puja festival on the banks of the Hooghly River in the eastern Indian city of Calcutta. Thousands of Hindu devotees reach the riverside at sunset and will spend the night praying.

religions of the Middle East, beginning with Judaism, make "story" itself the central metaphor of religious expression. Unlike the eternally cyclical rhythms of nature, stories have a beginning and an end. Ancient Judaism conceived of the cosmos as a great unfolding story told by a great divine storyteller (God): In the beginning, God spoke, the world was created, and the story of revelation began.

Three versions of this story of revelation arose in the Middle East—first the Judaic, then the Christian, and finally, the Islamic. For each version, human beings are considered human by virtue of being children of the one God who created all things. All three traditions tell the myth of Adam and Eve as the first human beings and venerate the patriarch Abraham, whom each considers the true model of faith and obedience to divine revelation. And in all three, the problem of life is viewed as "sin"—failing to follow God's will or laws, a combination of idolatry and human selfishness that leads to injustice. The ideal goal of life is for humans to be in harmony with the will of God, whereupon peace and justice will reign and death will be overcome.

While all three religions believe that the means for bringing about this era of peace and triumph over death are obedience to the will of God, each has its own unique understanding of that obedience. In Judaism, it is living according to divine law, Torah; in Christianity, it is acceptance of divine grace offered by the incarnation

All that remains of the great temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, is the Western Wall. It is considered to be the holiest of sites where observant Jews come to pray.

of God, in the person of Jesus, the messiah; and in Islam, it is proclaiming the reality of God, his last prophet Muhammed, and submitting to his law, *Sharia*. Although the three Abrahamic religions have their own stories of the cosmos, full of many trials, triumphs, and tragedies, each tells of the human–divine story having a happy ending. In contrast to the myths of nature, harmony, and liberation, traditions founded on the myths of history regard time not as the enemy but as the very place for encountering the ultimate reality, which is God. The goal for them is neither to escape time by returning to the beginning through ritual, nor to rise above time in mystical ecstasy, but to meet God in time, to live righteously, and at the end of time, to reside in paradise with God. Time for the faithful is promising, and the future is ultimately hopeful.

## The Fundamental Terms and Organization of This Book

Each of the great world religions speaks to the problem of morality by guiding individuals beyond the confusion, self-centeredness, and suffering that came with the origin of urbanism and the new individualism that arose in early Eurasian history, from 3500 BCE and onward. Each posited a new path to grasp the essential unity and interdependence of all human beings. And each sought to provide life with meaning by depicting individuals and communities as participating in a great cosmic story that can provide drama and purpose to human life. In addition, these stories show individuals a way to overcome the finality of death.

When we stand back at a great distance, we can use the four types of myth or story outlined earlier—those of nature, harmony, liberation, and history—to provide a simplified overview of the major world religions. As we get closer, however, we discover that each of these stories has variations expressing internal differences in doctrine and in practice. This textbook explores the most important and central aspects of these traditions, a first treatment.

In this book, we examine how human beings in each instance struggled to continue the religiousness of their ancestors over the millennia, but we devote more extensive discussion to the history of these world religions in the radically different, fast-changing, and globalizing world since 1500, the beginning of the modern era. We will see how Western civilization gave birth to modernity and, through its colonial expansion, spread its religious and cultural influences around the world, disrupting premodern religious cultures everywhere. **Colonialism** is part of the story of virtually all religions and civilizations, East and West. But after 1492, modern Western colonialism came closest to achieving global domination. Propelled by European colonialism, Christianity became the first faith to span the globe, forcing every religion to reckon with its beliefs, its practices, and its critiques of other religions.

**colonialism:** the political, social, cultural, and economic domination of one society by another

We will also describe how colonialism, in turn, provoked postcolonial reactions that have divided those within each religious tradition into three groups. Recurring in this textbook, each merits special attention and definition:

**fundamentalist:** one who rejects aspects of modernity and wants to return to the perceived foundational purity of an ancestral sacred social/political order or way of life

1. ***Fundamentalists***, who reject important aspects of modernity and want to go back to what they perceive as the purity of an "authentic" social/political order manifested in the sacred way of life of their ancestors.
2. ***Modernists***, who seek an accommodation of their religious tradition with the insights of science and the social and political realities of modern life.
3. ***Postmodernists***, who while rejecting the dominance of science and Western modernity seek a new situation that affirms the role of religion in public life in a way that embraces religious and cultural diversity.

While some fundamentalists reject everything modern, most nonetheless accept modern technology while rejecting any ideas derived from the sciences that would call into question the foundations of their religious worldview. Fundamentalists tend to interpret their scriptures literally; they typically reject interpreting the texts allegorically or symbolically. For instance, a modernist Christian might interpret the seven days of creation as symbolic periods of uncertain length; a fundamentalist, however, would be inclined to say, "No, we are talking about creating the world literally in seven 24-hour periods of time, so scientific accounts of the origin and development of the universe over millennia are false."

Among modernists and postmodernists, most argue that some parts of the religious tradition must change. What is distinctive about the modernist view is that any human understanding of religious truth and practice can be subject to historical change and development, but this is a notion that fundamentalists find utterly unacceptable.

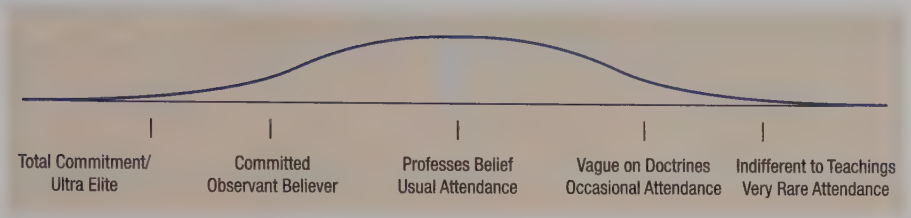



Figure 1.3 Mapping the typical spectrum of believers in religious communities.

As Figure 1.3 indicates, religions should not be studied as abstract beliefs but as the beliefs and practices of real people. The range of beliefs that humans adopt in any religious tradition range from the virtuosos to the average believers to the hardly observant. The elite have a complete commitment and lifestyle to the highest religious ideals. At the other extreme are those who are indifferent to doctrine or who barely share any beliefs. In learning about world religions, being attentive to this variance offers clues about how religion has brought out the best and the worst of humanity in history.

Our treatment of the history of each tradition in each chapter will be organized with common areas of analysis:

- Overview
- Encounter with Modernity
- Premodern
- Modern
- Postmodern
- Conclusion

The overview at the start of each chapter introduces the basic worldview of the religious tradition. The section that follows, "Encounter with Modernity," describes a particular moment in which premodern religious traditions clashed with the modern worldview and explains the diverse responses that emerged from that encounter. Next, each chapter shifts back to the premodern period and the origins and development of the tradition, to better explain why modernity represents a challenge to it. This period is accounted for in two phases—a formative period, which traces the origins of the traditions, and a classical period, which explains its fully developed premodern beliefs, rituals, and institutions. The section on modernity traces the diverse fundamentalist and modernist responses that developed in each tradition as it was challenged and threatened by Western colonialism and its modern scientific/technological worldview. This is followed by a postmodern section, in which we survey the most recent reactions to the adaptations each tradition has made to the modern world. These reactions tend to be postcolonial revolutions (in most regions, after 1945) to reclaim religious and cultural identities that existed before the advent of modern Western colonialism. In this way, we show why the world, with all its possibilities for coexistence and conflict, is the way it is today. The conclusion to each chapter addresses the implications of this history for the future of each tradition.

## Historical Overview: From Premodern to Postmodern

The structure of this book revolves around two great transitions in human history:

Premodern to Modern
Modern to Postmodern

The first began with urbanization, and the second began with globalization.

From about 8000 BCE, the domestication of plants and animals made village life possible. Acquisition of agricultural skill then allowed the development of the first great cities, from approximately 3000 BCE, bringing about a great transformation in human experience. Urban life drew people together out of different tribal groups. In the earliest indigenous human groups, everyone lived close to the rhythms of nature, in extended families or clans that shared a common way of life and that lived by the same myths and rituals. In the cities, however, people came together from different groups, bringing with them different stories, different rituals, and different family identities.

The complexities of urban life led to the specialization of labor. Whereas in indigenous societies everyone shared in hunting and gathering or simple agriculture, in the cities society became more complex and differentiated into classes (peasants, craftsmen, noblemen, priests, etc.). In a parallel fashion, elaborate and detailed new mythologies emerged in these first cities, assigning special powers and tasks to each of the many gods and spirits of the different tribes now embraced as the gods of the city.

These changes fundamentally transformed the economies and cultures of the new urban centers. In earlier indigenous groups, identity was collective because everybody shared the same stories and hunting and gathering activities. The cities, by contrast, were communities of strangers. People did not automatically share a collective sense of identity.

The loss of that collective sense of identity and the emergence of large, impersonal urban city-states in Egypt, India, China, and Mesopotamia led to growing populations for whom the experience of the world was marked by suffering and cruelty. Populated by strangers and ruled by emperors, kings, or pharaohs considered to be representatives of the gods or even divine themselves, these new city-states eventually faced a threefold crisis.

First, indigenous tribal collective identity was experienced as eternal—the tribe never dies. However, in urban contexts, humans began to think of themselves as individuals, and mortality suddenly loomed as a personal problem even as life seemed more cruel and uncertain. With the greater development of individual self-awareness, death presented people with a new and unsettling problem: What happens to my (individual) "self" when I die?

Second, urban life created the new problems of law and morality. In the indigenous group, the right thing to do was prescribed by ritual, and the same rites were known and respected by all. In cities, people from a variety of religious traditions lived together, yet as individuals, each looked out for his or her own good, if necessary at

the expense of others. Thus, in the cities, law emerged to set the minimum order necessary to sustain human life. It also became necessary to develop a system of ethics to persuade people to live up to even higher ideals.

Third, life in the city-state evoked a crisis of meaning. Can life really have any meaning if it is filled with injustice, disrupted by epidemic diseases, and ends in a meaningless death? How to explain the reality of human life that, often, good people die young and those doing evil prosper? Answering these questions of **theodicy** is what all world religions do through compelling myths and powerful rituals.

**theodicy:** explanation providing meaning to evil and death

The great world religions emerged in the three centers of civilization of the ancient world—China, India, and the Middle East—as their founders and prophets responded to critical questions about the meaning of life, mortality, and morality. Between 800 BCE and 600 CE, all developed their classical expressions, dividing much of the world among them (see Map 1.2) in the context of the formation of great empires that united peoples of various tribes and city-states into larger political entities. These new political orders created the need for a more inclusive understanding of human identity. Sages and prophets arose who redefined the meaning of being human in terms beyond the boundaries of the tribe and the city-state, seeing a higher unity to reality beyond the many local gods and spirits. These ideas about the meaning of the divine–human relationship remain central to the world's great religions.

**premodern:** society in which little or no separation exists between the dominant religion and social structure

Today, the secularizing influences of modernization and unprecedented international migration are transforming the ancient geographic division of the world's religions. Before we can explore the struggle of peoples everywhere to continue the religiousness of their ancestors, we need to be clear about the social dimension of the terms ***premodern***, ***modern***, and ***postmodern***.

**modern:** society that separates its citizens' lives into public and private spheres, restricting religion to private life

In general, premodern history describes a range of societies in which religion played the decisive role in explaining and ordering life. In premodern societies, religion provided the most certain knowledge one could have of the realities underlying the world; consequently, religious authority played a central role ordering each polity's social, political, and economic life. In this respect, all premodern cultures have more in common with each other than with modern **secular** (i.e., nonreligious) culture.

**postmodern:** society typified by accepting public diversity in both religious beliefs and social practices

**secular:** sociologically used to mean "nonreligious"

With the advances in science made during the eighteenth century, the scientific worldview spread globally and, for many, came to replace religion as the most certain form of knowledge. The modern period is marked by a tendency for individuals to view religion as a matter of personal faith or opinion. Gradually, most areas of public life were secularized. That is, religious leaders and doctrines no longer played central roles in politics, economics, or public education. The most dramatic institutional expression of this change in the West was the emergence of the separation of church and state. The secular state was the expression of "modern" reality—politics governed a society's public life, and religion was a private matter for individuals and their families. From the end of the nineteenth century up until the early 1970s, many scholars even predicted the end of religion itself and a coming nonreligious, or secular, stage in world history.

Every premodern society saw the universe through explicitly religious eyes and pronounced its vision of life sacred. Since all premodern societies were dominated

**Map 1.2** Distribution of world religions circa 1500 CE.

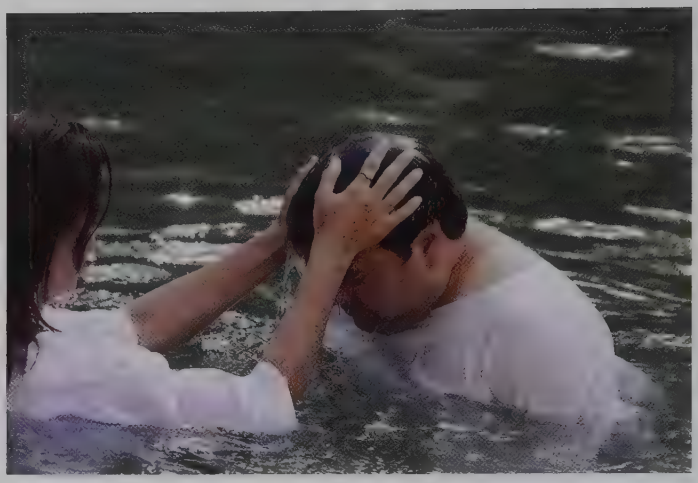
by the influence of religious authority, they all understood their worlds through religious myths and rituals that had been passed down for many generations. Modern culture, by contrast, tended to emphasize the centrality of rational and empirical science. In addition, the modern view held that history represented inevitable progress toward an ideal future, progress that could only be accomplished through science, with its "objective view" of the world. For modernists, science and the progress of history would finally end the centuries of human bloodshed caused by religions.

While the contrast between premodern and modern is dramatic and clear, our third term in this sequence—postmodern—needs clarification. According to the postmodernist thinker Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), this era is characterized by the collapse of the all-encompassing sacred stories or "grand narratives" through which human beings interpreted life in their respective cultures.[2] In ancient societies, these **metanarratives** (to use another of Lyotard's terms) were the religious myths of the four types we have described; the notion that they were true for all times and places went virtually unquestioned. In modern culture, the primary metanarrative has been the story of history as progress driven by science and technology. However, the globalization of religious and cultural interaction that began in the twentieth century has tended to "relativize" all metanarratives—that is, to see each as a historical construction, and to regard none of them as ultimately, universally true. Significantly, this includes the modern myth of inevitable scientific progress.

**metanarrative:** a grand cosmic and/or historical story accepted by the majority of a society as expressing its beliefs about its origins, destiny, and sacred identity

In the premodern world, a single grand narrative or religious worldview was typically experienced as true and meaningful by the majority of people. It is this kind of metanarrative that has collapsed for many in our day. For Lyotard, "postmodern" is more a style of thinking than a stage of history. It invites pluralism and rejects imposing a single truth on all. In our postmodern world, a new type of metanarrative is arising globally, an anti-metanarrative accepting the reality of religious and cultural pluralism. In this anti-metanarrative, no single story is all-encompassing for all people in a given culture—especially as a global culture emerges. The grand stories of the world religions have thereby become miniaturized and globalized. Everyone has his or her own stories, and acknowledges that other people live by other stories.

In this textbook, we also suggest a correlation between the postmodern challenge to modernity and the postcolonial challenge to colonialism. A postcolonial era typically begins with rejection of the modern Western historical metanarrative of scientific and technological progress, opening the door to postmodern awareness and critiques. However, that door swings two ways: Some seek a return to premodern, fundamental notions of religious truth and practice, insisting that there is only one true religious story and way of life, while others embrace the postmodern situation and seek to accommodate the reality of diversity. What these fundamentalisms and postmodern pluralisms have in common is a rejection of the modern strategy of privatizing religion. Both insist that religion ought to play a role in influencing not only private but also public life. Fundamentalists advocate accomplishing this by returning to an absolute religious metanarrative and work to impose a political order that should shape public life for everyone. In contrast, postmodernists accept a plurality



An adult pilgrim is baptized in the Jordan River, Israel.

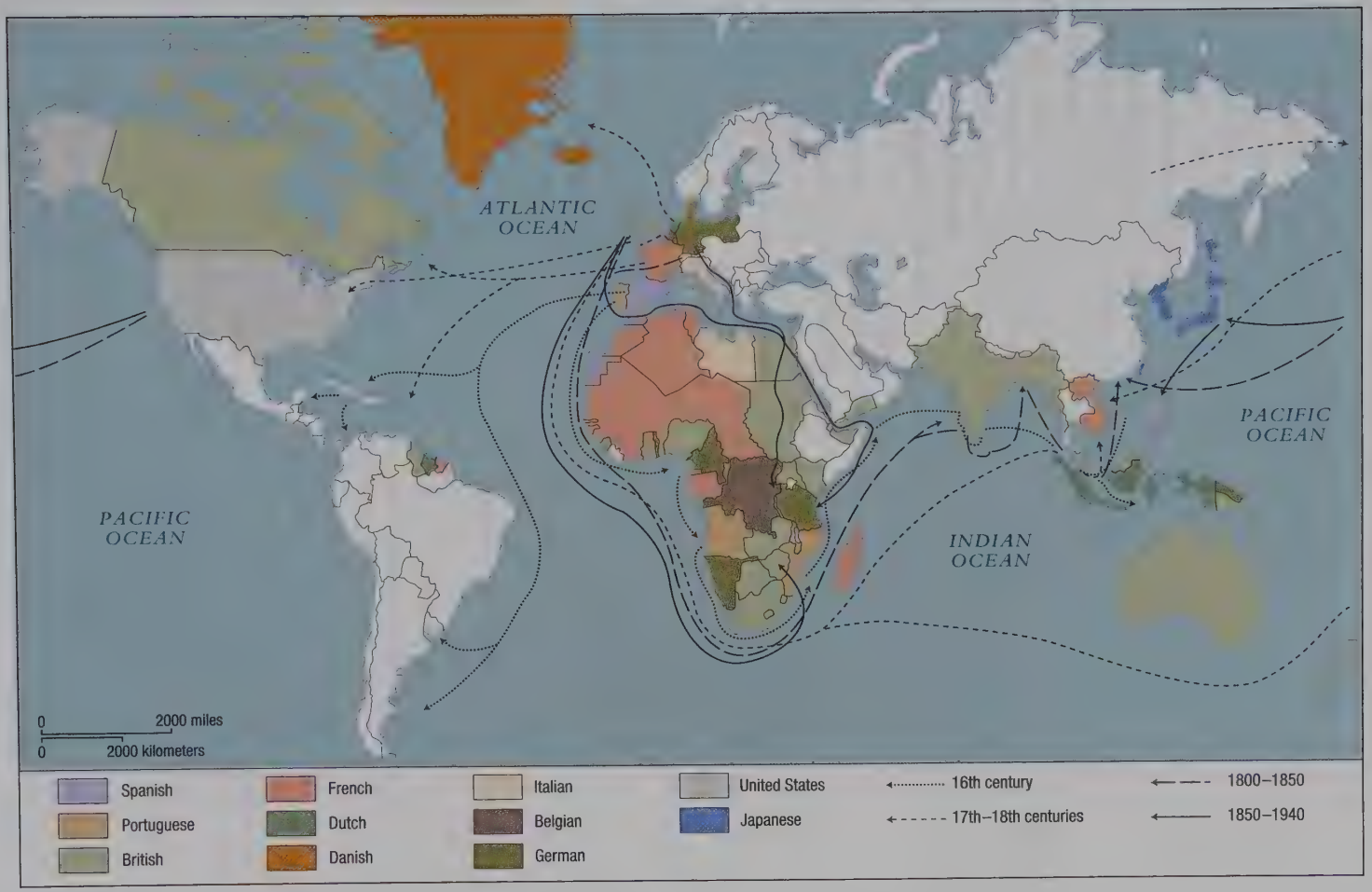
of narratives, recognizing the public benefits of embracing religious pluralism in an age of globalization. Today, all the world's religions are caught up in the struggle between their premodern, modern, and possible postmodern interpretations.

Because Christianity is the dominant religion of Western civilization, the civilization that produced modernization, it went through the trauma of accommodation to modernity first. And being the first, it had the luxury of embracing modernization in slower stages than those religions that did not encounter modernization until it had attained a more developed form. Therefore, Chapter 4, on Christianity, will have to tell two stories. One is an outline of the intellectual and social history of the West that resulted in modernization, and the other is the story of the role that Christianity played in that history, both in promoting modernity and in resisting it.

Some have charged that modernization is a form of Western cultural, and perhaps even religious, imperialism that has been forced on other cultures. However, modernization and secularization challenge all sacred traditions and identities, including those of Western religions. As we shall see in this book, modernization did not have an impact on all religions simultaneously, nor did all react in exactly the same way—although there are striking similarities. Therefore, we should not expect all religions and societies to exhibit exactly the same patterns and responses.

## The Modern/Postmodern Transition: Colonialism and Socialism

In the nineteenth century, the synergy of Western science, economics (capitalism), and technology fostered among the dominant European nations, especially England and France, a thirst for building colonial empires. These colonial ambitions were paralleled in the modern period by only one Asian nation—Japan. By 1914, most of the world was under the domination of Western European culture. Geographically, the Russians and the British controlled about a third of the globe. In terms of population, the British Empire controlled about a fifth of the human race—nearly 400 million people—while France controlled over 50 million colonial subjects (see Map 1.3).




Map 1.3 Missions and colonialism.

Colonial dominance (and often governance or rule) and paternalism (the British spoke of "the white man's burden" and the French of their "mission to civilize") were accompanied by the spread of science, technology, and capitalism, which proved traumatic to indigenous cultures and their religious traditions. The impressive achievements of Western civilization often prompted elites, at least initially, to embrace modernization and secularization. Almost inevitably, however, there was a religious and political backlash, seen in struggles for national liberation as indigenous peoples sought to reclaim their independence and autonomy and to reaffirm the value of their original ways of life. This backlash often included a resurgence of religious influence as a force in anticolonial struggles. Most independence movements readily adopted a key element of Western civilization—**nationalism**—in their attempts to resist foreign occupation and to protect their religious and cultural identities. The common global emergence of **religious nationalism** across the world conjoined the struggle for independence, and then the struggles of post-colonial independence, with the protection of the people's religious tradition.

**nationalism:** belief in the nation as a sacred entity

Many of these movements paradoxically struck an alliance with socialism, the philosophical and political movement that arose during the nineteenth century in Europe among the new urban working class as a protest against the poverty and social dislocation created by early capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. Socialism was itself a modernist movement, sustained by a vision of scientific progress against modern capitalism. In the formulation by German socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883) of "scientific socialism," it became an international movement with an impact on world history as profound as that of any world religion. Indeed, as religious societies around the globe revolted against European imperialism, most experimented with some form of socialism. The twentieth century produced examples around the world of Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and neo-Confucian forms of socialism. In its secular form, socialism (or communism) became the dominant element in Russian culture, spreading throughout Eastern Europe and across Asia like a new missionary religion, most prominently "converting" China, the largest country of Asia, by 1949.

Consistent with the myth of modernity, Marx saw history as progressively unfolding in three stages defined in terms of a class theory of society:

1. First, primitive communism (tribal societies), in which all were equal.
2. Next, the rise of complex urban civilizations, which led to societies ruled by bureaucracies and pitted privileged classes against the masses.
3. Finally, the last stage of history, in which society would once more be communistic. In this last age, all would again be equal—for all complex, class-defined institutions would wither away and people would live together in spontaneous harmony.

Marx secularized the biblical myth of history by replacing the will of God as the directing force of history with what he maintained were "scientific" laws of social development that guide the progressive unfolding of history. Marx believed that

capitalism depended on a large class of urban workers who, once they were gathered together in the industrial cities of the modern world, would organize, creating an international workers' union that would lead a worldwide revolution. The violent upheaval leading to the replacement of capitalism would be justified by the creation of a new, classless society based on freedom, equality, and social justice for all.

Socialism represents an ambivalent rejection of a modern scientific world dominated by an economic system, capitalism, that seemed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. It claims to be "modern," "secular," and "scientific." Yet Marxism, unlike capitalism, retains much of the religious and ethical power of Abrahamic traditions, with their emphasis on justice for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. And like those traditions, it leads its followers to a just, final outcome of history.

While socialism challenged the impact of modern capitalism on global society, the events of the two world wars decisively undermined belief in the inevitable progress that science would bring to the world. World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945) in fact shattered this myth. Science and technology, which had been viewed as the engines of progress, were now the means of unprecedented destruction. The utopian dream of technological progress ended with the firebombings of civilian cities in Germany and Japan, and then as a nightmare in August 1945, when newly invented atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The use of nuclear weapons brought World War II to an end, only to usher in a "cold war" between the Soviet Union and the United States. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, an armed standoff between these two superpowers threatened a third and final world war of thermonuclear annihilation. The makers of the modern myth of progress had failed to foresee how a technology that relentlessly increases efficiency could be applied not only to the improvement of public health and the production of less expensive consumer goods, but also to the invention of weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, the world wars not only called into question the "scientific age of progress" but also brought an end to modern colonial empires. The twentieth century saw the withdrawal of European powers from the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Africa. European colonial powers left behind independent nation-states whose rulers were unelected. Many of these new political entities had boundaries drawn by the colonizers, frequently without regard to ethnic identity or religious communities.

## Postmodern Trends in a Postcolonial World

In the modern period, the social authority of religion was undermined by the new scientific rationalists whose descriptions of reality, they believed, explained how the world "really is," in contrast to the fantasies of religions. In the postmodern world, many have argued that not only religious knowledge but also scientific knowledge is relative.

That is, science, too, can be seen as an imaginative interpretation of the world based on faith (i.e., faith that the world can be "known") and cannot offer the final truth about reality. These arguments are similar to the disputes between premodern religious philosophers (defending religion) and the new secular scientists (challenging religion) in the early modern period. The reemergence of such disputes suggests that the postmodern situation is one in which the unquestioning faith in science that became widely held as a characteristic of the modern era no longer exists. Thus, for individuals living in the postmodern period, scientific knowledge now competes with religious knowledge.

**heretic:** from an ancient Greek term for "one who chooses"; used to communicate the postmodern idea that everyone has no choice but to choose one's beliefs, since there is no longer a single center of "taken-for-granted, commonly shared truth" in many societies

In the premodern period, most people acquired their religious identities because of where they were born. But in the postmodern world, many people are faced with what sociologist Peter Berger (1929–2017) called "the heretical imperative."[3] *Heretic* comes from an ancient Greek word that means "to choose"; in the Abrahamic traditions, to be a heretic was a very negative and dangerous identity to adopt. In our postmodern world, however, growing numbers are becoming **heretics**—that is, those who are no longer simply born into a given religion or identity but now must choose among alternatives, including whether to stay with whatever religion one inherited at birth.

In this increasingly connected and globalized world, all the world's religions now have been forced to take account of each other. Today, global media allow distant viewers to experience the positives and negatives, the exemplary and the scandalous, of individuals acting in the name of their religions. Around the world, religious adherents and skeptics encounter their own uniqueness amid the undeniable reality of the world's enduring, diverse faiths.

Before the era of postmodernism, other people's religions could be readily dismissed in a series of negative stereotypes. When people of diverse religions are neighbors, this option is both more difficult and more dangerous. To the degree that stereotyping and discrimination persist, they promote prejudice, conflict, and violence. The alternative is to develop new understandings of the relation between world religions and world societies—one that tolerates all people following their chosen faith traditions, including nonbelief, yet also shares their wisdom with each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding. This alternative—to appreciate what we have in common as well as to acknowledge our distinctive differences—has been explored brilliantly by two of the great religious figures of the twentieth century, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Each spiritual leader "passed over" from his native religion and culture to the religious world of the other and came back enriched by that second tradition without having abandoned his own. (We return to them in Chapter 9.) You are invited to embark on a similar journey through the study of the world's religions today.

"Modernity multiplies choices. . . . The modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the heretical imperative."

—Peter Berger *The Heretical Imperative.* New York: Anchor, 1980, 27–28

## Discussion Questions

1. Define religion in terms of its six characteristics—sacred, myth, ritual, community, morality, and religious leaders—and explain the possible relations among them.

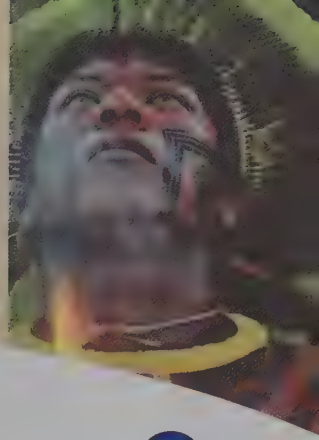
2. What do the authors mean when they argue that all morality is religious, even that of atheists?
3. In what way does religious language complicate the question of whether there is agreement or disagreement among religions on various issues? Describe in terms of the *via analogia* and the *via negativa*, giving examples of each.
4. Explain the four types of religious story, and give a historical example of each.
5. Why did urbanization lead to the emergence of the great world religions? That is, what new urban problems did these religions address?
6. What is colonialism, and what is its significance for religions and cultures in the modern period?
7. In Adam Smith's famous *The Wealth of Nations*, he describes a natural law of the market whereby supply and demand always finds equilibrium. How might this be seen as a religious assumption?
8. According to the authors, modernization privatizes religion, whereas in premodern and postmodern religious movements, religion plays a public role in society but in different ways. Explain.
9. Define Marxist socialism. Why was it an attractive option to religious movements protesting modernity?
10. How might you justify the statement that both postmodernist and fundamentalist religious movements are examples of Peter Berger's "heretical imperative"?

## Key Terms

**colonialism**
**divine**
**fundamentalist**
**globalization**
**heretic**
**metanarrative**
**modern**
**morality**
**myth**
**nationalism**
**orthodoxy**
**orthopraxy**
**postmodern**
**premodern**
**religion**
**religious institutions**
**ritual**
**secular**
**sympathetic imagination**
**theodicy**
**transcendent**
**ultimate reality**
***via analogia***
***via negativa***

## Notes

1. F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans Green, 1880), p. 218.
2. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
3. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 27-28.



# 2 INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

## Overview

Indigenous peoples are ethnic groups whose ties to their lands go back a millennium or even longer. Found on every continent except Antarctica, some indigenous peoples have remained in their ancient homelands; others are now relocated to "reservations" within modern states; still others (in growing numbers) live in two worlds, moving between life in their modern countries and settlements of their native group.

All surviving indigenous peoples (or "first peoples") have been affected by the modern world. Their cultural traditions and religious lives have been altered, often dramatically, by outsiders encroaching on their lands, exposing them to new diseases, and forcefully assimilating them into the majority citizenry. Around the world, hundreds of indigenous groups have succumbed or been assimilated, and their religions (like their languages) lost forever.

The religious traditions discussed in this chapter are different from those of the great world religions covered elsewhere in this book. Yet these indigenous peoples and their religions remain a noteworthy part of the world's religious landscape even today, despite their small populations. Although few possess scriptures or permanent temples, these independent, ethnic, and land-bounded religions are worthy of study for three reasons. First, they help us to understand the general phenomenon of humanity as a religious species. Second, the treatment of indigenous peoples by the great world religions provides insights about the latter's role in the historical expansion of early states and modern nations. Finally, we can see beliefs and practices of the

◀ Wearing feathers to suggest soul flight and adorned with body paint and ornaments to array the power of his ancestral protectors, an Amazonian shaman enters a healing trance.

world's indigenous religions being assimilated into the great world religions as well as into the new religions forming across the globe today.

This chapter begins by looking back to prehistory to understand some of the common worldviews, religious roles, and ritual practices evident among early *Homo sapiens*. We then examine case studies of the world's last living hunter-gatherers and simple agriculturalists. Although it is impossible for any textbook to represent the richness and diversity of the world's surviving indigenous religions, the case studies convey an awareness of the spiritual vitality and the neglected histories of these extraordinary indigenous traditions. Understanding religions today is enriched by seeing how all humanity, even in isolated, nonliterate groups, has always been "religious."

## Origins of *Homo religiosus*: Prehistory

Around 100,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* emerged from a 4-million-year process of hominid evolution to become the animal who makes tools, controls fire, buries its dead, speaks, and thinks symbolically. Long before agriculture and urbanization, the first *Homo sapiens* lived in hunter-gatherer societies. By studying their artifacts as well as the small-scale societies that still subsist in this mode of life, we can imagine what their existence was like. We know our ancestors usually lived and ate well, and that they made efforts to communicate with the spirits of their ancestors and with animals. Most likely, they regularly sought assistance from these spirits through trance and altered states of consciousness, which may have been the origins of religion.

Although the earliest humans used language, writing had not yet been invented. Consequently, these societies had oral cultures in which everything that was known was known only because others remembered it. And memories were made readily accessible because they were expressed in stories—stories of sacred ancestors, spirit beings, and heroes. Not recorded in written texts, these stories were kept alive in song, dance, and public narrative.

In the worldviews of indigenous peoples, time and space are not abstractions but are experienced according to ancestral myths and sacred experiences. Religion likely began at sites where people believed the powers that govern the universe first appeared. Humans experienced every place of revelation as a "center of the world" (*axis mundi*). In the indigenous religions, most everything is spiritually alive. The trees, the mountains, the rivers, special stones, animals, and of course, humans are said to have souls or spirits that give them life, or *animate* them. Anthropologists once used the term ***animism*** to describe a worldview in which a measure of conscious life is attributed to these entities.

***animism:*** belief in an inner soul that gives life and identity to living things and emphasizes rituals in which humans interact with other souls

**cosmogony:** mythological account of the world's creation

Each of the thousands of indigenous peoples have (or had) a unique **cosmogony**, or account of the world's origins and its essential powers. Because in most cosmogonies

**Map 2.1** Locations of some of the prehistoric and ethnographic cultural groups discussed in this book.

# Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 2 million BCE | Early hominids use the first stone tools |
| 500,000 | Fire domesticated |
| 100,000 | Evidence of ritual burials by *Homo sapiens* |
| 50,000 | Modern man biologically; hunting-gathering societies found across Africa and Eurasia |
| 40,000 | Human language and symbolic thought reach new level of advancement |
| 20,000 | Human burials across Africa and Eurasia with offerings, reflecting belief in afterlife |
| 10,000 | *Homo sapiens* disperse widely across North and South America |
| 7000 | Beginnings of settled agriculture, first cities |
| 5000 | Earliest archaeological evidence of Australian aboriginal belief connected with Rainbow Serpent, likely the oldest continuing belief in the world |
| 4800–2200 | Era of prolific megalithic tomb burials across Atlantic coastal areas of France, England, Ireland, and Scandinavia (35,000 sites, with Stonehenge most famous) |
| 2000 | Major states arise on the Yellow River in China, Indus River in India, Nile River in Egypt, and on the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia |
| 800 BCE–200 CE | Era of lasting formulations of social-spiritual teachings defining ethical modes of human existence in cities |
| 100 BCE | States expanding into wilderness frontiers; assimilation of indigenous peoples |
| 1400 CE | Populations in Americas live in hierarchically organized chiefdoms or small kingdoms |
| 1492–1502 | Columbus reaches American continent |
| 1492–1600 | Europeans make first contact with native peoples of Western Hemisphere continents<br>Introduction of the horse to the New World<br>90 percent indigenous mortality in many settlements<br>Christian missionaries fan out across the New World |
| 1546 | "New World" colonists form societies and economies dependent on slave labor |
| 1606 | Earliest recorded contact between Europeans and Australian Aborigines |
| 1616 | Smallpox epidemic decimates native tribes in New England region |
| 1709 | Slave market erected on Wall Street in New York |
| 1716 | Alamo Mission in San Antonio is authorized by the viceroy of Mexico; the mission becomes an educational center for Native Americans who converted to Christianity |
| 1808–1811 | Tecumseh, chief of the Shawnees, organizes a defensive confederacy of Northwest frontier tribes, attempting to make the Ohio River a permanent boundary between the United States and indigenous peoples' land |
| 1811 | William Henry Harrison, governor of Ohio, leads the ferocious Battle of Tippecanoe and destroys Tecumseh's town as well as remnants of his indigenous confederacy |
| 1830 | Indian Removal Act passed; over next ten years, the U.S. government forcibly removes thousands of indigenous peoples west of the Mississippi River |
| 1838 | "Trail of Tears": Native Americans force-marched by U.S. military to settle in Oklahoma |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1850–1875 | Hunting by colonists leads to near extermination of buffalo herds, undermining Plains Indians' survival |
| 1871 | Indian Appropriation Act specifies that no tribe thereafter would be recognized as an independent nation |
| 1876 | Lieutenant Colonel George Custer leads army attack on assembled native tribes during which he and all 250 of his soldiers are killed; afterward, the U.S. Army orders troops "to attack and kill every male Indian over twelve years of age." |
| 1888 | The White Australia Policy articulated |
| 1889–1890 | Paiute spiritual leader has vision and spreads message of the Ghost Dance |
| 1890 | Massacre of Lakota at Wounded Knee, South Dakota |
| 1910 | Bwiti, a West Central African religion, is founded among the forest-dwelling people of Gabon and Cameroon |
| 1918 | Native American Church founded in Oklahoma |
| 1920 | Santo Daime is begun in western Brazil |
| 1930–1989 | Soviet repression of shamans in Siberia and Outer Mongolia |
| 1950 | People's Republic of China labels shamanism a "superstition" and represses spirit mediums across China |
| 1951 | Australian government formally adopts assimilation policy toward aboriginal peoples |
| 1975 | The Australian Senate acknowledges prior ownership of country by aboriginal people and seeks compensation for their dispossession; the World Council of Indigenous People is founded |
| 1978 | Religious Freedom Act promises to "protect and preserve" for Native Americans "freedom to believe, express, and exercise" traditional religions, "including access to sites, possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through traditional rites" |
| 1989 | Kayapo people joined by international indigenous group rights advocates to protest dam project at Altamira, Brazil |
| 1992 | Australian High Court rules that native title to land has not been extinguished, rejecting 200-year-old settler claims that aboriginal lands were *terra nullius*, "no one's land" |
| 2004 | National Museum of the American Indian opens in Washington, DC |
| 2008 | Australian and Canadian governments issue formal apologies to aboriginal peoples for policies "detrimental to integrity of lives, including forcibly sending indigenous children to Christian boarding schools" |
| 2013 | Kayapo clans oppose new Amazon basin dam project on the Xingu River that will flood tribal lands |
| 2016–2017 | Native Americans across the United States stage massive demonstration to protest placement of oil pipeline on Standing Rock Sioux native lands |
| 2019 | Oldest pictorial record of storytelling in figurative art discovered in Indonesia |
| 2020 | Mining company Rio Tinto dynamited 46,000-year-old sacred aboriginal site in Western Australia, acting with government's ministerial consent |

the group is a part of an everlasting cycle of nature's rhythms, its people see themselves as an integral part of the cosmos. Everything in premodern indigenous group life reinforced a collective sense of common identity: All shared the same occupations (hunting and gathering, simple agriculture), the same myths, and the same rituals. As a result, a person's identity was embedded in the collective identity and fate of the group. The group lives on, and the individual can stay connected to it, even after his or her own death.

This collective worldview is very different from the individualism and social fragmentation that are common in human affairs today. In the following chapters, we will show how each world religion pushed humanity out of the collective community mindset and toward greater individualism. Comprehending the features of indigenous religions will make clear how the world's religions have some of the basic features of the earliest religious traditions, yet also have simultaneously reinterpreted them as human existence changed.

Human nature features qualities that underlie the most basic and universal expressions of religion. These include a tendency for repetitive behaviors (ritual), an ability to create meaning (symbols, ritual acts), the enhancement of survival by identification with land or territory (sacred space), and a strong mother–child bond (devotion). Archaeologists have determined that about 30,000 years ago, humans with biological traits the same as our own established themselves across Eurasia. They wove cloth, used finely wrought fishhooks, constructed boats, and were experts in subsistence wherever they lived. The record of human life indicates that in every society over the last 100,000 years, the mastery of tools was accompanied by the development of language and the unmistakable presence of religion.

***Homo religiosus:*** term coined by Mircea Eliade that characterizes humans as inherently religious beings

The universality of religion in human societies even led Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), a pioneering scholar of comparative religions, to call our species ***Homo religiosus***, or "religious humanity." In fact, religion has always been at the center of human culture. Thus, religion supported the success of small hunter-gatherer groups, the domestication of plants and animals, and later, reinforced the creation of cities, empires, and superpowers. We now turn to the very beginning of this extraordinary story.

## Encounter with Modernity

The indigenous peoples of the world are a regular presence in global news accounts. One regular feature is an exploration of a notable yet hardly known religious tradition centered on the community led by a healer ingesting a potent herb in search of sacred experience. This might be to contact the gods, channel the presence of ancestors, or seek an improvement in the group's well-being. After exploring the

context for the tribal group's use of peyote, cannabis, mushrooms, and so on, the author usually takes the article in the direction of considering possible applications of this indigenous practice to the modern world and its rising indices of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Sometimes, it draws on the insights of scientists who might be studying this question.

The other very common subject of news about indigenous peoples globally is protest, usually tribal groups protesting encroachments on their lands by corporations and governments. For example, since 2016 Lakota Sioux have staged protests to block the Dakota Access pipeline from being built across their land. In 2019, several tribal groups in the Brazilian Amazon strove to have the government enforce their land rights against illegal usurpers. Tragically, many of these protesters were murdered. Some of these protests were, however, successful. In 1976, Australian aborigines successfully won a court case that kept the Queensland Mines Limited company from excavating on their sacred lands. These lands, they argued were where the green ants lived, who they believed were their ancestors and one whose survival their own depended. These conflicts are escalating worldwide as global population and the press for economic development pushes nations and companies to expand production in even the most remote parts of the earth. There is always the need for more oil, natural gas, and croplands, and it is indigenous peoples who are increasingly in the way. Like the species of living beings on these lands that face possible extinction from such habitat intrusions, indigenous peoples across the world face the same danger from the prospect of losing their own traditional homelands.

## The Limitations of the Term *Animism*

The term *animism*, though still in widespread use, is rooted in a problematic distinction within earlier scholarship. An *animist* was said to see the world as inhabited by a host of souls (*anima*) that are embodied in a variety of life forms. By applying the term only to indigenous peoples, who usually worship a polytheistic pantheon, early scholars tried to distinguish between them and peoples adhering to the major monotheistic religions. But does a belief in souls truly separate humanity's religious belief systems and its thousands of believers? All three Abrahamic faiths hold that human beings possess souls (anima), as do traditional Indian and Chinese religions. In that sense, most world religions are animist. Further, even the monotheistic religions hold that a multitude of nonhuman "souls" inhabit the world alongside human beings: angels, ghosts, *jinn*, demons, and so on. A second limitation with the term *animism* is that it also masks the large array of very different conceptions of "soul" recorded in human religious history.

## Religion's Origins Among Hunter-Gatherers

For nearly all of our species' history, humans lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers. However, our world has been so drastically transformed that few, if any, people anywhere on the planet still live that way.

The earliest *Homo sapiens* existed in small groups of related individuals (usually fewer than fifty); they lived off the land, moving with the seasons to find wild fruits and nuts and to be close to the animals they hunted for food. Close-knit bonds within these groups were essential to everyone's survival, with individuals sharing the food and relying on each other for protection. Also typical was a division of labor, with men predominantly the hunters and women the gatherers. Compared to the permanently settled agricultural societies that began over 9,000 years ago at the dawn of recorded human history, most of these hunter-gatherer societies were highly egalitarian, with food and wealth shared equally.

In choosing the term *indigenous religions*, we are implying that the social and religious lives of people following this way of life are rooted deeply in a given place. The reader should note that we are not equating modern hunter-gatherers with humans living in this mode of life 30,000 years ago, or suggesting that these contemporary groups are "living fossils," since none today live isolated from the developed world and all have distinct histories. Most indigenous peoples today are quickly learning about the legal systems of modern states and selectively adopting modern technologies in an attempt to preserve their lands, ease the burdens of subsistence, and ensure their survival.

The Kung San of southern Africa, one of the most studied, late-surviving hunter-gatherer groups, are typical. A nomadic people, the Kung utilize simple tools and build temporary houses. Their language expresses an intricate knowledge of their environment, recognizing 500 species of plants and animals, yielding a diet that consists of 105 different foods. Mastery of an environment shared with large predators is typical of such groups. Once scholars gained firsthand knowledge of hunter-gatherers like the Kung, they began to appreciate the highly skilled nature of this mode of life, the clear rationality of the people, and the very sophisticated languages and cultures that had evolved among them. This new understanding disproved the theories of nineteenth-century social scientists, who had speculated that religion had its origins in the fear and ignorance of humans facing a threatening and incomprehensible world.

Prehistoric cave art: the first shaman. Over fifty examples of animal–human figures like this one suggest that shamanism had its origins in the prehistoric era.

A basic human capacity for language and symbolic thought was certainly present by 100,000 BCE among *Homo sapiens*. Around this time, humans began performing ceremonial burials, painting with carefully mined red ochre and other pigments, carving art, keeping records on bone and stone plaques, and crafting personal adornments. They also made music with flutes and drums. It was by this time that humans acquired the capacity to think symbolically, in parallel with their development of more complex languages.

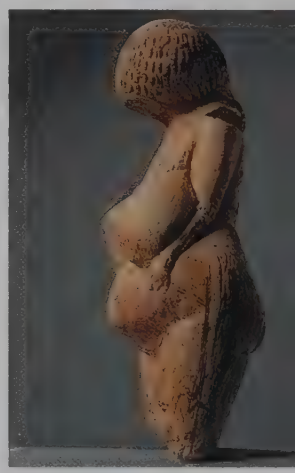
As we saw in Chapter 1, religion is centered on humans establishing and expressing life's ultimate truths. Scientists therefore have suggested that this new ability changed the destiny of our species: "categorizing and naming objects and sensations in the outer and inner worlds, and making associations between resulting mental symbols . . . for only once we create such symbols can we recombine them and ask such questions as 'What if . . . ?'"[1] The fact of the simultaneous emergence of modern humans and religion indicates that answers to "What if?" questions led to attempted explanations of many things: the unseen powers of life, the inner world of personhood, and the mystery of death. The fascinating artifacts of prehistoric religion reflect human engagement with each of these realms.

## Fertility, Childbirth, and Survival

One striking kind of object found across Eurasia in late prehistory is what scientists have called **"Venus" figurines**, small stone sculptures of females with large breasts and hips, often with their genitalia emphasized. To understand these objects, we must enter into the reality of prehistoric human life. Small tribes were greatly concerned with ensuring the regular birth of healthy children to keep their own group numerous enough for success in subsistence, hunting, and warfare. Further, since at that time all pregnancies and childbirths were high-risk events, the figurines likely related to concerns about birth and the survival of children in small groups. Some scholars therefore interpret the Venus figurines as icons representing a protecting, nurturing "mother goddess."

**"Venus" figurines:** prehistoric Eurasian, small stone figures with exaggerated female characteristics

Added to this evidence for veneration of a mother goddess is another important archaeological find: After 15,000 BCE, the dead were uniformly buried in mounds or graves in the fetal position, suggesting that people perceived the earth as a womb from which some sort of new birth was expected.



The makers of Venus figurines revered a special female power that lay behind the mystery of conception and birth. They focused on the miracle of females producing beings from their own bodies and celebrated the ability of women to perpetuate human life.

## Religion in Prehistory: The Mystery of Early Cave Rituals

In the cave paintings of Eurasia, hunted animals such as bison, bear, and deer are carefully rendered in a variety of styles. Humans are also shown, some in poses that are puzzling, challenging us to understand who created the images and the meaning of their context.

Caves can be dangerous, strange places. So why did groups of individuals take the trouble to go several hundred yards under the earth? The artifacts found there show that our ancestors were engaged in no ordinary task. Archaeologists surmise that these sites were related to the hunts undertaken by bands of able-bodied men. Males hunted to secure the meat essential for their diet, the skins for their clothing, and the bones and sinew used for their tools and adornment. Some painted cave scenes indicate the dangers of hunting: Wild bison, cave bears, and large cats are shown inflicting lethal injuries on humans.

Scholars believe that prehistoric hunting-group initiation ceremonies were held in underground sanctuaries decorated with carefully rendered images of animals like this early masterpiece of painting from the Chauvet cave in southern France.

The hunt required group coordination for success, since tracking, stalking, encircling, and using spears or stones to make kills at close range could not be achieved without coordinated action. A hunting expedition could fail if a single member failed. Based on similar rites among modern hunting tribes, scholars view some of the prehistoric caves as ritual theaters for initiating adolescent boys into the ranks of hunters. Through this initiation ritual, young men bonded with the other adult males with whom they would risk their lives.

Such practices in the service of human survival formed the basis of the first religions according to the definitions we discussed in Chapter 1: They helped *bind* a group critical to the society's success, and they reinforced the human need to *be careful* with regard to the unseen powers surrounding them. The second point is especially important if we assume that the elders taught that each animal, like every human being, has an inner spirit or soul, one that must be respected in death. We now turn to this topic and trace its frequent presence in a variety of modern indigenous groups.

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: The Dreamtime

In this creative era, a host of supernatural beings from an unspecified somewhere arrived and set out to populate and transform the previously flat and featureless Australian landmass. By their activities . . . they created diverse, religiously-charged landforms, richly imprinted with meaning and replete with fauna and flora. During their wanderings and numerous adventures, they established rituals and human institutions. These set in place for all time the various groups, their languages, cultural characteristics, and bound the first humans to a kind of contract. Through obedience to the laws of Dreaming, and the proper and regular performance of rituals, living Aborigines are charged with keeping the whole cosmic system of order going. This occurs under the watchful and caring gaze of the creative beings . . . who monitor human affairs without direct interference, but stay in touch via spirit-being messengers through whom they channel new knowledge and ritual elements into human society. [Humans] remain keenly aware of the proximity . . . of the spiritual powers to their well-being and future existence. Failure by humans to uphold the human [Dreamtime] blueprint will cause the inhabitants of the spiritual realm to cut off the flow of power into human society and bring all life to an end. . . . Each succeeding generation is charged with enormous responsibility for society's continuing reproduction.

Source: Robert Tonkinson, "The Mardu Aborigines: On the Road to Somewhere," in George Spindler and Janice E. Stockard, eds. *Globalization and Change in Fifteen Cultures* (Belmont, CA: Thomson, 2007), p. 233.

# Indigenous Religious Traditions: Soul Belief and Afterlife

There are indigenous peoples today who subsist primarily as hunter-gatherers, shifting slash-and-burn agriculturalists, or settled agricultural cultivators, as well as some who have assimilated in various ways into the world's modern nations. The traditions of these indigenous groups relating to the sacred, though uniquely grounded in each people's separate historical existence, remain an important part of the story of the world's religions today.

Studies of the myths of indigenous peoples recount what is sacred to the group: the origins of life, its relations with animals, its connections to landforms, and the origination of the norms governing the members of the group. The religious experiences cultivated among these groups also show the great extent of humanity's experimentation with altered states of consciousness and extremes of bodily endurance. The rituals performed to heal, revere, and express group solidarity reveal the ways our species has conceptualized and faced the dual mysteries of birth and death.

The presence of a human belief in some sort of afterlife emerges from the earliest archaeological records of ceremonial burials. In hundreds of excavations, burial clearly was done to preserve the body and provide it with decoration (colors, jewelry, flowers, animal skulls, antlers), foods (meat, grain), and tools (spears, sticks). These arrangements suggest that early humans felt that there was a nonmaterial component of the self, a soul or spirit that "lived on" after the physical body had died. Death seems to be likened to sleep, and the function of burial seems to be to open a gateway to an afterlife.

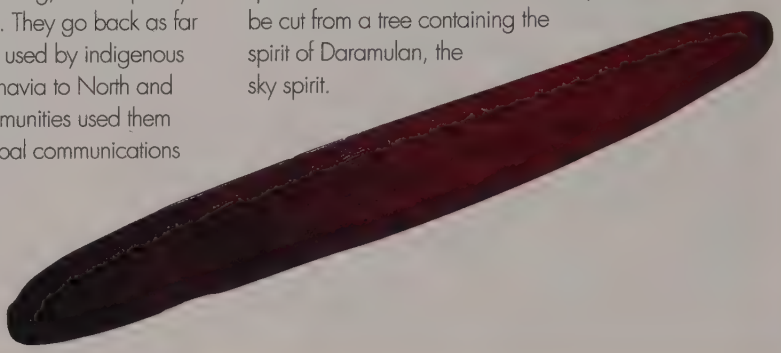
"The first thing when we wake up in the morning is to be thankful to the Great Spirit for the Mother Earth: how we live, what it produces, what keeps everything alive."

—Joshua Wetsit, an Assiniboine from Montana

SOURCE: *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life,* p.117.

## Awakening the Spirits: A Bullroarer

Bullroarers are rounded, semi-rectangular pieces of wood secured by a string or rope. When they are swung, they produce a loud, vibrating, low-frequency noise that can be heard for miles. They go back as far as 18,000 BCE and have been used by indigenous peoples from Australia to Scandinavia to North and South Americas. Indigenous communities used them variously, from simple music to tribal communications to religious ritual. Australian Aboriginal tribes used them in initiation ceremonies and in burials to ward off evil spirits. So sacred were these that they had to be cut from a tree containing the spirit of Daramulan, the sky spirit.



A bullroarer painted with a serpent motif. Swinging the roarer produces a deep, piercing sound that elicits a numinous feeling in ritual participants.

More recent studies of surviving indigenous religions focus less on belief in vaguely defined souls or spirits and more on the phenomenon of how indigenous peoples actually perceive relations with a range of others, human and nonhuman, through their sensory experience. For them, being religious is not about creeds or texts that need interpreting. Instead, people are engaged with the environment around them, in which certain stones, animals, trees, and the dead may "speak" to the living. Most indigenous people sustain a very close relationship with the natural world, one in which the ecosystem is sensed as alive and part of a larger, ordered cosmos.

### Circular Time

**circular time:** awareness, especially in hunter-gatherer societies, life follows the same recurring cycle of time determined by the sun, moon, and the seasons

In hunter-gatherer societies today, people still live by the rising and the setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, the solstices, and the seasons of the year. Time is circular. This **circular time** follows the pattern of the celestial and natural world. Human lives, too, revolve like the seasons. In myth and ritual and in contact with their sacred centers of revelation, indigenous peoples seek equilibrium with the environment.

This intimate relatedness with the natural world is realized through the engagement of all five senses and is guided by myth, mind, and emotions. Resident spirit beings see, hear, and speak. Indigenous traditions vary by the ways these spirit beings speak, their personalities, and the landscapes they occupy through the seasons. The human community's attuning of its senses to these entities through ritual ensures their successful survival. Most groups believe these ties with a spirit world extend into an afterlife. Some assume that souls of the dead reincarnate as humans or other life forms. Relating with spirit beings (or souls) requires ongoing connections with them through often intricate communal rituals.

## Ancestors: The Living Dead

Among most indigenous peoples today, dreams or visions support the idea that the dead can "return" in nonmaterial form. As we will see, this belief is supported by spirit mediums who serve as communicators with the dead, enabling a departed soul to speak to the living from the other side. Indigenous peoples today, like most humans before the modern era, regard dreams and visions as key sources for understanding the ultimate meanings and purposes of life.

For indigenous peoples, death is never the end of the essential person. On the contrary, death is an elevation of one's status to that of sacred ancestor. Ancestors, in turn, are venerated as spirits who can help the living by guiding them—for example, in successful hunts or by invigorating wild foods and cultivated crops. At the same time, misfortune in a community may be the fault of the living, who have incited the ancestors' anger and punishment by breaking a moral law or neglecting a ritual. In such situations, harmony between the living, the dead, and all of nature needs to be restored.

Ancestral spirits are custodians of tradition. They may harm those who disregard custom and bless those who are faithful to it. Some scholars believe that later religions evolved from early animist views of the world and efforts to manage the activities of supernatural spirit-beings. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that the most elaborate burials in late prehistory were conducted to protect the living from the power of malevolent souls. Some scholars have surmised that powerful ancestral spirits (both the kindly and the dangerous) became the world's first gods.

Burial of children from 20,000 BCE. With the remains are perforated shells and remnants of decorated clothing. Found in Grottes des Enfantes, France.

## Dani of New Guinea: Ghost Ancestors, Ritual Warfare

The Dani, a simple agricultural group in highland New Guinea, believe that the soul survives into an afterlife and can affect the lives of its community. In their death rituals, the Dani try to direct the soul of a person who has just died to a distant ghost land. Yet many ghosts are thought to return and cause problems, especially if their last rites were not done properly or their death was not avenged in timely fashion. Thus, Dani elders take great care when performing funerals, and they maintain small guest houses to accommodate—and pacify—the occasional ghost visitors.

Further, rival Dani villages engage continually in lethal warfare, whose main purpose is for the men to satisfy a newly departed kinsman's spirit by killing someone on the enemy's side. The Dani moral code thus includes the precept of "taking a life for a life." Moreover, since losing a kinsman inevitably weakens the collective community and each individual's soul, avenging the loss of the deceased by killing an enemy tribesman is the only means to restore the vitality of the survivors' souls. In fact, Dani life, from kinship to food production, is organized around the central need for supplying the feasts that must be held to mark deaths and celebrate revenge killings. Appeasing ancestral ghosts is always a concern for the living.

The Dani are representative of the many indigenous groups in which shamans are absent or marginal. Lacking a class of priests, every adult learns to perform the most common rituals. But Dani society also has wise religious leaders who are looked to for leading major communal festivals based on their ready knowledge of the intricate rites and their skill in hosting the regular visits of ancestral ghosts.

## Totemism: Australian Aboriginal Religion

Anthropologists have noted that many indigenous groups use a special symbol to express their fundamental identity. It affects their choice of marriage partners, promotes collective solidarity, and regulates relations with outsiders. This symbol is a **totem**. It can be an animal, reptile, insect, or plant. Emblematic of the community, it is treated as sacred. The relationship between totems and groups reveals a special circle of kinship and a primal connection between humans and the rest of nature.

**totem:** symbol taken from the natural world to represent the common origin and essence of a social group

Totemism is still found among some Native Americans and is common among the various aboriginal peoples of Australia. The latter believe that their origins occurred in the **Dreamtime**, when the world as we know it was being created from a previously flat and featureless landmass by a host of spirit-beings. Their myths inform them that their clan consists of the descendants of their totemic progenitors, who created them from their own bodies, an essence that established their existence as humans. Each progenitor-ancestor then led them to their current home territories, creating spiritually charged landforms including rivers, mountains, and other creatures. During their wanderings, they also bound them to a contract of sorts: In return for humans obeying the laws of Dreaming and performing prescribed rituals, the spirit-beings continue to maintain connections to their living "kin," sending blessings and power. Each totemic group faces the serious task of keeping the cosmic order going through its faithfulness to established traditions and morality.

**Dreamtime:** for Australian Aborigines, the time when the world was created and which exists in another realm

To understand this belief system, we can take an example from the aboriginal kangaroo clan. Its group members ritually decorate their bodies with kangaroo drawings, and before their children are considered to be adults, they must learn the distinctive dances and songs recounting the group's totemic kangaroo story. Elder men pass down these secrets to the young men through initiation. The group is also protective of its own "songlines," the myths that are sung to trace in detail the progenitor's trail

Members of the Emu totemic clan with the emu bird as totem dance in the yearly group reunion, Australia.

## RITUALS AND RITES: Shamans Across the World

The shaman remains the key religious specialist in many societies today. The term *shaman* comes from the Evenk, a group of hunters and reindeer herders in Siberia. The term was later adopted by early scholars for all similar practitioners. Shamans are still found among peoples on every inhabited continent and in the earliest records of our direct forebears.

Though differing in details of clothing and techniques, shamans are found across the world today: left, a Yanomami shaman in the Amazon; right, a Korean shaman in Seoul.

of creation over the land. These oral records give the group a shared identity and territory; celebrating them faithfully enables the group to propagate and prosper.

Elders pray to and invoke the totemic kangaroo spirit for healing and guidance. Women of the kangaroo clan who want to become pregnant visit the places where the totemic spirits reside, for they believe that conception—via spirit/soul acquisition—cannot occur without exposure to the totemic creature's life force.

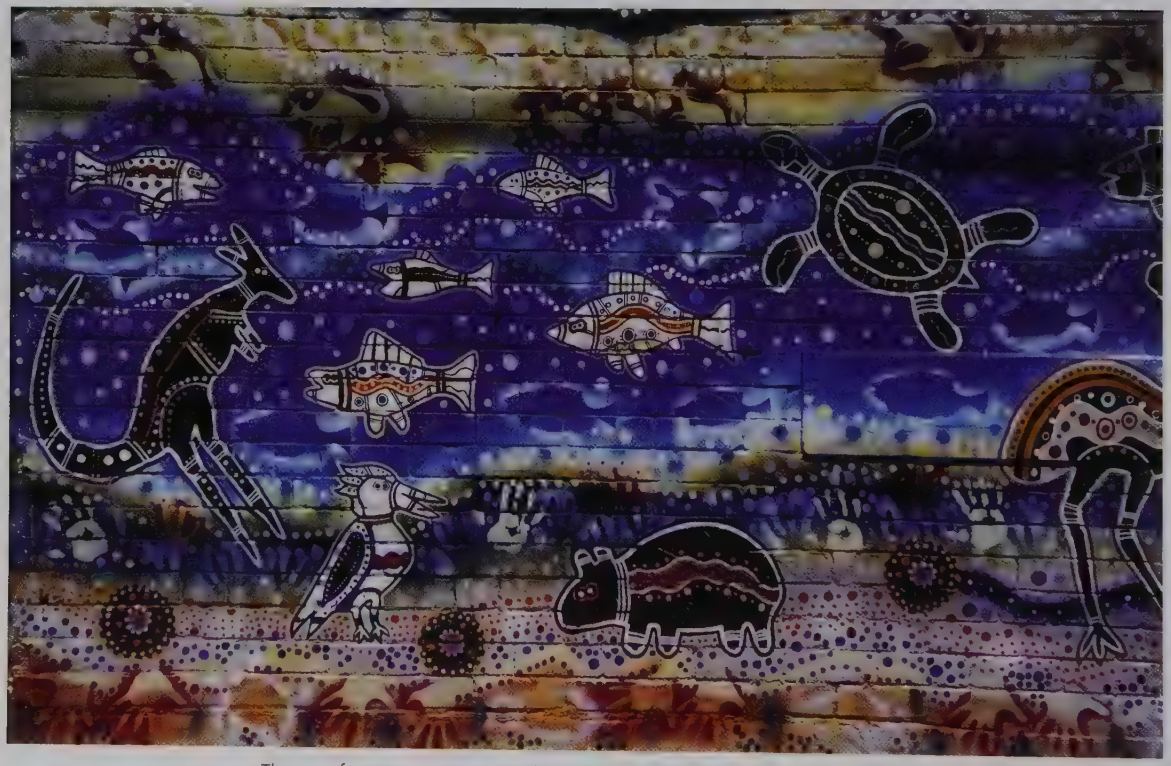
**taboo:** action or object that is normally forbidden

Although harming or eating a kangaroo is almost always forbidden, or **taboo**, to members of the kangaroo clan, there is a regularly performed ritual that unifies the totemic group. In addition to singing and acting out their myth of origins, all the "kangaroos" in the group, on this one annual occasion, gather to renew their primordial identity: they hunt, kill, and eat a kangaroo. These rites are performed to increase the totemic species and give spiritual strength to individuals in the group. Although the design of the world was fixed once and for all in the Dreamtime, it is the task of humans, through this and other totemic rites, to maintain and renew this creation.

"We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through. Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to love . . . and then we return home."

—Aboriginal proverb

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) argued that totemism points to a key feature in all religious life. It is the sacred totem (in our example, the kangaroo) that gives the group a singular focus and, by extension, stands for the group itself. For Durkheim, religion is about making a group's own identity, survival, and worth sacred by focusing on and identifying with a common symbol. What human groups felt as an unseen but sacred force was really, he argued, the power of group unity, and this sense of unity allows for social stability. Durkheim's influential theory is that whatever else has come to define religious beliefs across the world's human groups, religion's power to bind us together is what established it, and what keeps it central to human life.



The art of contemporary Australian Aborigines depicts totemic beings and their role in creation during the "Dreamtime."

# Shamans: "Technicians of the Sacred"

In the event of failed hunts, debilitating illness, or other misfortunes, members of indigenous societies turn to a **spirit medium**, or **shaman**, who can intervene with the unseen powers. Many traits and skills are attributed to shamans.

**spirit medium/ shaman:** person who communicates with deities and spirits through ritually induced trance

The role of the shaman varies across the world. In some indigenous societies, they dominate in the group's religious life. In others, the medium remains a marginal, often-distrusted figure resorted to only in dire circumstances, while chiefs, priests, or healers perform the group's ritual and healing functions. And some indigenous societies have no tradition of spirit mediums at all.

The most common role of the shaman is the ability to heal (both literally and metaphorically) through **spirit flight** achieved in a trance or an altered state of consciousness. The trance state can be reached by fasting or by drumming and singing, but shamans worldwide have discovered a long list of psychotropic agents for altering consciousness to their purposes. Practices may also involve the inhaling of incense, snuffs, smoke from tobacco or other psychoactive herbs, or the ingesting of mushrooms or potent plant concoctions. The shaman's trance may be marked by bodily fever, loud breathing, protruding eyes, insensitivity to temperature or pain, convulsions, or trembling. In many traditions, the shaman's soul is thought to leave the physical body, free to fly to the heavens, beneath the earth, or under the sea. On these spirit flights, shamans attempt to locate another person's lost soul, perhaps because it has wandered off in this world or passed on to the afterlife. Another common belief is that the dead person's spirit needs a shaman's assistance to reach the afterlife dwelling place of the clan's ancestors.

**spirit flight:** shaman's attempt to locate another person's soul in another realm

Shaman healers usually cooperate with spiritual beings. In this way, they are distinct from **sorcerers**, mediums who manipulate the spirit world and coerce spiritual and supernatural beings without their consent, often for the sorcerer's own benefit and against community values.

**sorcerers:** mediums who manipulate the spirit world, often for their own benefit rather than on behalf of the community

Shamans are ritual specialists. Through ritual, they unite the community in the face of disease, death, and discord. Many shamans return from their spirit flights to teach their communities, and through trance rituals, they demonstrate that the daily, ordinary world is not all there is. In most indigenous societies, the living and the dead, the community and its sacred ancestors, form one great community. Binding it all together, the shaman uses his or her body as a bridge to connect these two worlds. If harmony in an indigenous group has been shattered by troubling ancestral ghosts, only the shaman, who is able to visit both worlds and to communicate the needs of one to the other, can restore balance.

Through initiation, shamans find connection with a divine protector, or **tutelary spirit**. This is a supernatural agent, often an ancestral spirit, whose help is required to perform the difficult spirit flights, negotiate with evil spirits, compel a soul to return, or increase the shaman's powers. In many tribes, shamans have human helpers who watch over their unconscious bodies during trance states, for they, too, can remain stuck as spirits if their souls cannot return to their bodies.

**tutelary spirit:** supernatural agent, often an ancestral spirit, who helps a shaman

The shamanic world is one in which spirits coexist with humans in a layered cosmos, where humans occupy the earth between an upper and a lower world. The spirits are particularly accessible to humans around special physical objects or unusual places. Each culture regards these locations as sacred, as a "center of their world" (*axis mundi*). Most commonly, such sites are actual or symbolic sacred mountains or sacred trees, revered as places of original revelations, intensely alive with spiritual power or **numinous** presence. Several modern examples show how shamanic traditions share common traits.

**numinous:** human perception of the sacred

## Case Studies of Indigenous Religions Today

### *Healing Trance: Kung San Healers*

The Kung San of southern Africa believe that the dead go to an afterlife, a "next world" populated by ancestors, one that is similar to this world and is linked closely to the living. Souls that miss the living return to earth as ghosts and try to sicken friends and family members in an effort to hasten their death and arrival in the afterlife. The most accomplished Kung shamans (***n/um kausi***) have the ability to enter into a trance during night-long dances, during which everyone joins in ceremonies of rhythmic drumming and singing around a fire. With this group support and social purpose, anthropologists suggest, the Kung shamans activate a natural force within their bodies, the *n/um*, a power that "boils" in and moves up the spine. The body shakes and sweats. Once inhalations grow forced and deeper, the shaman's eyes roll back, indicating a trance state. Now highly empowered, the shaman touches the bodies of others to transfer the healing force of the boiling *n/um* into them. Expert healers can also identify and suck out poisons from the bodies of the sick; some may massage the patient with a mixture of the shaman's own sweat and blood. If healers perceive the ghosts of troublesome ancestors watching the dance outside the community circle, they may shriek or hurl stones at them. The most effective Kung shamans are honored, but they are otherwise typical members of the tribe. Most are men.

***n/um kausi:*** shamans of the Kung people

A Kung healing ceremony. The trancing and healing performed by Kung shamans depends on the community's participation in drumming, singing, and dancing.

The shaman's role is universally regarded as mortally dangerous. The Kung call entering trance "being half-dead," and they take great care to guard a shaman's physical body while the healer's soul journeys to "the other world." Like many indigenous peoples, the Kung are also careful not to startle sleeping individuals, for fear that souls that can wander off during sleep will not have time to return and thus remain disembodied.

Men and women who become shamans in the Kung or other cultures must train through long apprenticeships. But in most groups, it is common for shamans to feel that they were in fact chosen for the role by a tutelary spirit, often in spite of their

own resistance. Novice shamans must prove their ability by surviving an initiation ordeal that may require fasting and acts of extraordinary physical endurance. Each must demonstrate the capacity for trance, the grace to convey a tutelary spirit's words, and evidence of the capacity to embody supernormal power. Many shamans feel that they wear out their bodies by repeatedly undergoing near-death experiences in the course of spirit flights.

### *Lakota Vision Quest for a Spirit Ally*

The Lakota of North America (home regions: North and South Dakota) believe, as do the Kung, that every human being has the potential for supernatural connection and that all should be encouraged to develop this ability. Young Lakota men go to a sacred wilderness region on a vision quest in search of a personal protector spirit or adult spiritual identity. After preparatory training, the apprentices fast and purify themselves in a sweat lodge. Then each one ventures out alone into the wilderness.

Those who are contacted by strong spirit allies in dreams and those who have vivid visions of the ancestors may go on to become shamans after further training with an elder practitioner. Apprentices learn the techniques of trance, the myths of the tribe, the location of "power places" in the landscape, and other healing arts that involve the use of herbs as medicines. Shamans are never the same after initiation; many receive a new name and adopt a new identity. Lakota shamans can encounter evil spirits in trance that must be tricked, seduced, or killed to complete the healing task. Given these arduous demands, becoming a shaman is often described as a death-and-rebirth experience.

"You dance, dance, dance, dance. Then *n/um* lifts you up in your belly and lifts up in your back, and you start to shiver. In trance, you see everything, because you see what's troubling everybody. . . . Then *n/um* enters every part of your body, right to your feet and even your hair. . . . Then *n/um* makes your thoughts nothing in your head."

—Kinachau, a Kung San healer

SOURCE: Richard Katz, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), page 24.

## Bear Sacrifice: A Widespread Arctic and Pacific Rim Tradition

We have noted how shamans can serve as mediums who bring the spirits down to earth for ritual negotiations. An example of this practice is the bear sacrifice, once one of the most widespread rituals in the world and common across the upper Pacific Rim and the vast circumpolar region from northern Japan to North America. Still performed in modern times, shamans carefully manage the sacrificial rituals, offering gifts in exchange for taking an animal's life. A common belief in hunter-gatherer societies is that animals are actually spirits in disguise who assume animal bodies to interact with humans. This may have been the earliest example of humanity conceptualizing divine incarnation, seeing animals as embodiments in our world of supernatural beings.

Among the Ainu people on Hokkaido Island in northern Japan, spirits that incarnate themselves as animals are called *kamui*. They mostly dwell in an "other world" but can have contact with humans by coming to earth and assuming life in a bear's body. The Ainu conception is that humans and *kamui* are of equal status. Although the latter (when unencumbered by a body) can fly and have magical powers, only

Ainu elders celebrating a Bear Feast. Offerings of food and sake are placed before the dead bear; swords and sacred quivers hang on the altar behind the men. This photograph was taken by the anthropologist Bronislaw Pilsudski (1866–1918), who lived with an Ainu community for several years in the early twentieth century.

humans can give them what they really need and want: sake (a wine made from rice) and *inau*, fragrant willow sticks. In the Ainu understanding, the spirits don animal bodies to acquire their fur as "clothes" to trade, for *inau* and sake from humans. This transaction requires that they be ritually hunted and have their bodies killed to complete the exchange that benefits both parties.

The Ainu shaman performs special rituals to attract a spirit in its bear incarnation. Knowing that an exchange has been requested, and consenting to it if humans have kept up their part in earlier exchanges, a bear cub leaves trail signs that allow hunters to track and capture it. Villages then raise the specially chosen animal until it becomes fully grown. Afterward, the shaman addresses the bear respectfully, makes the proper offerings, performs a ritual execution, and releases the *kamui* spirit to return to the other world, presumed to be happy with its gifts. The Ainu believe that if the sacred conventions of the exchange are duly observed, both the *kamui* just released and other spirits will continue to assume animal form. Thus, the shaman ensures that the people will have a continuous supply of meat and shelter.

## Shamans Who Repair the World

A shaman's expertise can also be effective when a human group acts improperly. The practices of the Inuit (who dwell around the Arctic region) illustrate the shaman's role in repairing the world.

The Inuit believe that the great goddess Takanakapsaluk, Mistress of Sea Animals, lives on the ocean floor and releases whales, seals, fish, and other marine creatures into their midst so that they may be killed for human use. Without this, life would not be possible in the cold, frozen region they inhabit. But the Inuit believe that when their community performs the ritual improperly or someone breaks a moral taboo, the goddess's hair "becomes soiled" and she burns in anger, holding back all creatures under her control. The Inuit shaman must then be called for a séance. To follow one account, when the shaman encounters the goddess

> the shaman finds her angry, with hair uncombed, filthy, and hanging over her eyes. The creatures of the ocean sit in a pool beside her. The shaman gently turns the goddess toward the animals and a nearby lamp, combing and washing her hair. He then asks why the animals are not coming, and she replies that they are being withheld because the people have eaten forbidden boiled meat and because the women have kept their miscarriages secret, failing to purify their homes afterward. Mollified by praises and promises to make amends, goddess Takanakapsaluk releases the animals and they are swept back into the ocean. The shaman's return is marked by a distant, then louder call of "Plu-a-he-he!" as he finally shakes in his place, gasping for breath. After a silence, he demands, "Your words must rise up," and then the audience members begin to confess their misdeeds. By the end of the séance, there is a mood of optimism.[2]

"The greatest peril in life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All these creatures that we have to kill and eat, all we have to strike down to make clothes for ourselves. . . have souls, souls that do not perish and which must be pacified lest they revenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies."

—Ivaluardjuk, an Inuit healer

SOURCE: *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life, page 173.*

The Yanomami shamans of the Amazon rain forest also illustrate how mediums repair community life by communicating with the spirits. The village shaman locates and returns the disoriented souls of sick or dying villagers. If others have acted to weaken or steal someone's soul, the shaman must identify both the misdeed and the perpetrators. To be initiated as shaman and to achieve such abilities, an individual must memorize chants, drumming, and struts to attract the support of his special ancestral spirits. The Yanomami shaman must also master the use of the hallucinogenic snuff called *ebene*, a powerful substance thought to be a spirit ally that is essential for opening the shaman's body to perceive, feel, and contact his tribe's spirit allies.

The Yanomami shaman also has the power to conduct the spirits into the human world. The spirits can then be induced to enter the shaman's body and respond to questions about matters of concern, small or great. At times and without invitation, the shaman's mouth may speak the spirit's messages about group origins, life's meaning, or any hidden facts relevant to recent events.

The reliance on psychoactive substances to assist the shaman in achieving altered states of consciousness, as found among the Yanomami, is not universal.

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: A Peyote Ceremony

### Divine Communion

From that time, whenever they held peyote meetings, we all attended and . . . one time something happened to me. . . . I was sitting with bowed head . . . we prayed . . . then I saw Jesus standing there . . . I will pray to him, I thought. I stood up and raised my arm. I prayed. I asked for a good life—thanking God who gave me my life. And as the drum was beating, my body shook to the beat. I was unaware of it. I was just very contented. I never knew such pleasure as this. There was a sensation of great joyousness. Now I was an angel. That is how I saw myself. Because I had wings I was supposed to fly but I could not quite get my feet off the ground. . . . I knew when I ate peyote that they were using something holy. That way is directed toward God. Nothing else on earth is holy . . . and if someone sees something holy at a peyote meeting, that is really true. I understood that this religion is holy.

—Shirley Etsitty, Native American Church

Source: *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1996), page 71.

Drug-induced trances are limited mostly to groups in the Americas, where use of the cactus peyote, the vine extract ayahuasca, and plants such as jimson and datura have long been in the shaman's medicine bag. What is universal for shamans across the world, even among shamans utilizing psychoactive drugs, is reliance on the impact of rapid rhythmic drumming, dancing, chanting, and fasting to induce trance experiences. Thus, the drum or the rattle is a universal symbol of the shaman's extraordinary religious practice.

## The Cataclysms of Colonialism

A theme that runs throughout this book is the disruptions to life and religious traditions caused by modern European colonialism. For indigenous societies across the planet, this global expansion of invading outsiders and the political dominance they imposed have been disastrous. Native peoples of the New World and other remote regions were decimated by the diseases of Eurasia, to which they had no natural resistance. Often simultaneously, the disease-bearing outsiders plundered the native people's riches, utilizing horses and superior weapons technology to achieve their aims. In the early colonial era, millions of people in small-scale subsistence societies were killed or enslaved. When natural resources were discovered on native lands, the outsiders appropriated and transformed the native lands. Ways of life that had evolved over centuries were disrupted, often destroyed. Since religion is closely related to a community's way of life, the epidemics and genocide suffered by the world's indigenous peoples inevitably devastated their traditional beliefs and lives.

"Our church is the world."

—John Emhoolah, Kiowa leader of North America

SOURCE: *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life,* page 42.

Representative of this pattern is the series of events in nineteenth-century North America. In 1811, Tecumseh, chief of the Shawnee, organized a defensive confederacy of Northwest frontier tribes that attempted to make the Ohio River a permanent boundary between indigenous peoples' land and U.S. territory. In response, William Henry Harrison, governor of Ohio, led the U.S. Army to fight the ferocious Battle of Tippecanoe, destroying Tecumseh's town and confederacy. In 1830, the Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, empowering the government to forcibly remove all indigenous peoples to lands west of the Mississippi River. In 1838, the U.S. military force-marched all known Native Americans to reservations in Oklahoma, an episode of ethnic cleansing known as "the Trail of Tears."

Indigenous survivors of colonialism and their descendants faced stark choices. Would they risk the chaos of migration by retreating into remote lands still untouched by the colonizers? Would they acquiesce to a nineteenth-century government's program of forced resettlement on reservations? Or would they assimilate with the dominant society and submit to the national laws and social customs of others? Whatever the choice, the solidarity and cultural integrity of most of these displaced groups worldwide has weakened over every generation. Many today navigate between these options, but it has inevitably been the young who have seen the limits of their minority status, rejected learning the old dialects and religious customs, and responded to the allure of the dominant culture by embracing assimilation.

Exposure to missionary religions and their alien exponents often contributed to the downfall of indigenous religions. Governments in the Americas and Australia forced indigenous children to attend missionary schools, where Christianity was aggressively taught and traditional practices were ruthlessly banned. Students who spoke their native languages were subject to punishment. Missionaries viewed shamans as obstacles to the advance of the colonizing powers and often accused the native healers of combining evil with fakery: acting as "servants of the devil" while also being imposters or religious charlatans who exploited their own people. For the Euro-American Christian immigrants, shamanism represented the chaotic wilderness, and the shaman a source of disruptive chaos that threatened the colonial order. Under these circumstances, native peoples in many cases had to hide their drums, medicines, and sacred images. They believed that the only way to preserve their culture was to take it underground.

**Ghost Dance:** nineteenth-century Native American religious revitalization movement led by spirit mediums

Other native peoples, however, organized attempts to restore their place in the world and give new life to their traditions. In North America, shamans revitalized native peoples in the nineteenth century through a movement called the **Ghost Dance**. After the decimation of the buffalo by white hunters, which contributed to the destruction of the indigenous way of life on the Great Plains, several elders had the same visionary revelation: Their tutelary spirits announced a way to restore the lost world by bringing back the ancestors and causing the whites to disappear. These religious leaders proclaimed that this could be achieved if all the people performed a new dance ritual as prescribed by the spirits. Soon, this Ghost Dance was practiced with fervor across the Great Plains by those whose kin had died, with the dancers

falling unconscious in hopes of experiencing reunion with their deceased relatives. One leader in this movement had this vision of the Ghost Dance recorded:

> All Indians must dance, everywhere, and keep on dancing. Pretty soon in the next spring, the Great Spirit come. . . . The game be thick everywhere. All dead Indians come back and live again. . . . White can't hurt Indian then. Then big flood come like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that, water go away and then nobody but Indians everywhere and game animals of all kinds thick.[3]

The pain of engagement with outsiders is unmistakable in the Ghost Dance movement, which sought to bind a vision of ecological renewal with the restoration of traditional religious consciousness. In 1890, the U.S. Army was ordered to end this popular movement by massacring the men, women, and children who had gathered for a Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

By the twenty-first century, no indigenous societies remain that have not been exposed to the world of outsiders, with many the targets of genocidal persecution. Most of the Kung people have been relocated onto reservations, forced to give up hunting, and directed to adopt agriculture or simple craft production. The Ainu of northern Japan have suffered land seizures and discrimination and are so stigmatized today that few are even willing to profess knowledge of the old traditions and shamanic practices. Native peoples of the Amazon rain forest are now being displaced by land-clearing settlers and threatened by multinational mining and oil drilling projects. The history of Native Americans since 1500 is a story of genocide, land taking, and legal discrimination by the U.S. government against Native American religious practices. In the twenty-first century, hundreds of indigenous languages and religious traditions will likewise decline in use and disappear forever.

Some indigenous groups living far from energy resources the modernizing world first sought have survived with their traditions intact, but even peoples in the most remote places are now threatened by climate change. Other indigenous groups have found a successful means of assimilating, with members gaining education and employment outside the group and integrating modern economic life with indigenous tradition. Those groups that have retained autonomy, resisted assimilation, and worked to revitalize their identity show both the adaptability of human culture and the resilience of the human spirit. An example of this indigenous vitality is the Kayapo in Brazil, who now use the internet to share their anti-expropriation strategies and principles of cultural revitalization with other groups across the globe. Their experience emphasizes the role of the young as bicultural actors who negotiate with the world outside the indigenous group.

**syncretism:** combination of elements from different belief systems

Indigenous religious leaders also found other creative responses. Some advocated **syncretism**, in which established indigenous religious beliefs and practices were woven together with those of outsiders. In present-day Mexico, for example, shamans have integrated Catholic saints and sacramental theology into healing rites that utilize

Religious leaders in the Bwiti movement creatively combine regional and Christian traditions.

peyote, not wine, as a substance for "communion." Another example of combining elements from different traditions to create a new religion is **Bwiti**, a West Central African religion. Organized in the early twentieth century among the forest-dwelling Babongo and Mitsogo people of Gabon and the Fang people of Gabon and Cameroon, Bwiti incorporates animism, ancestor worship, and Christianity into its syncretistic belief system. Here, too, a mild hallucinogen plays a role, in this case the root bark of the iboga plant, which is now specially cultivated for its religious purpose. Individuals joining the Bwiti community are taught that iboga induces a rich spiritual experience, one that allows the disciple to be healed and solve problems.

**Bwiti:** West Central African syncretic religion

In a world in which the ancestral spirits clearly failed to protect the group or safeguard its territory, radical changes in indigenous religions were inevitable. Over generations, many shamanic traditions themselves have been diminished or reformulated to match the new life circumstances. Under colonial conditions and until today, traditions that were thriving only a few centuries ago now exist only in museum artifacts or as dim memories. What has proven the most enduring of these indigenous traditions, even in regions that came to be dominated by one or more world religions, is shamanism.

"The Catholic Church is a beautiful theory for Sunday, the iboga on the contrary is the practice of everyday living. In church, they speak of God; with iboga, you live God."

—Nengue Me Ndjoung Isidore, Bwiti religious leader in Africa

SOURCE: S. Swiderski, *La religion Bouiti*, vol. 1 (1990–1991).

Assimilating indigenous animistic and shamanistic traditions into urban-based civilizations goes back to the very beginnings of recorded human history, as we saw in Chapter 1. We will see in subsequent chapters how world religions from antiquity onward performed a central role in absorbing tribal peoples into states by "converting them" away from their indigenous religions. And in Chapter 9, we will see how the "civil religions" of modern nations focused on legitimating the often-violent work

## The Native American Church

In the United States today, over 550 Indian nations are recognized by the U.S. federal government, each with its own history and tribal land and each practicing its own distinct traditional religion. In the last century, there have been successful efforts to draw scattered Native Americans into new religious groups, in what scholars have identified as the "pan-Americanization" of indigenous peoples.

The **Native American Church** has one faction drawn into the orbit of Christianity and another that remains independent. But the two are united in their ceremonial use of the cactus peyote as a communal sacrament. This "melting pot" movement remains controversial among some Native Americans, who criticize how the Native American Church practices too much Christian syncretism. They dislike how it draws tribal members away from their own group's distinctive traditions.

Similar new indigenous peoples' religions have started in South America. Two examples are Santo Daime and União do Vegetal; both are syncretistic, influenced by Christian morality and folk religion, and centered on a traditional psychotropic herb, in this case ayahuasca. Both also have now spread across the globe, attracting nonindigenous devotees from Japan to Europe.

Source: https://nativeamericanchurches.org/

**Native American Church:** modern religious group uniting native peoples of North America

of assimilating indigenous peoples. Recently, some modern governments have issued formal apologies to indigenous peoples for their treatment of them and their ancestors: in 2008, for example, the Australian and Canadian governments issued formal apologies to aboriginal peoples for policies "detrimental to integrity of lives, including forcibly sending children to Christian boarding schools."[4]

In the following chapters, we can find repeatedly the imprint of indigenous religions, especially soul belief and trance. Soul beliefs remain nearly universal in the great religions, with East Asia's widespread ancestor veneration an important example of archaic practices that remain compelling. Death rites continue to be powerful expressions of religious tradition, and states of altered consciousness remain central to spiritual growth. The metaphor of human life existing on a plane between a heaven above and a netherworld below is found in all major world religions. Finally, sacred places that are believed to be at the center of the world (the *axis mundi*) in the early indigenous traditions continue to be revered in the great world religions. As for the

Kayapo chiefs act as religious and political leaders, trying to retain control of the land that is essential to the continuation of tradition.

## The Kayapo of Brazil: Selective Modernity and the Survival of Tradition

Until recent decades, the Kayapo simply killed all intruders on their lands, whether lumberjacks, gold miners, or rubber-tree tappers, and they were regarded as the most dangerous natives of the Amazon rain forest. Outsiders made every effort to exterminate the Kayapo, going so far as to fly over them to drop blankets infected with smallpox onto their villages. But in the middle of the twentieth century, Kayapo chiefs changed their relationship with outsiders, and in 1982, they regained ownership and control of most of their indigenous lands, the largest tract held by native peoples in South America. On a limited scale, their leaders have sold rights to cut timber and to allow outsiders to mine for gold, and used the substantial rents and taxes collected to sustain the people and protect their culture.

The Kayapo still consider themselves an integral part of the universe, bound to the cycles of the natural year and nature's ongoing rebirth. Returning from their hunts, men sing to the spirits of the game they killed in order for the animal or reptile spirits to remain in the forest. Each species is connected to a distinctive song that begins with the cry of the dead animal. A "center of the world" is located in each village's central plaza, where rituals and public life take place. To go back to the time of mythical origins and stimulate the energy required for life's prosperity and continuance, the Kayapo regularly dance the myths recounting their origins and subsequent incidents, recalling their past to reaffirm their identity and innate vitality.

Now that some of their young men have gained an education and attracted the support of international organizations upholding the rights of native peoples, the Kayapo have secured a firm legal existence in modern Brazil. Their chiefs have acted decisively and creatively to selectively modernize yet preserve their religious traditions. Using their taxes on tenant miners, they brought the group into the national cash economy, even going so far as buying airplanes and hiring Brazilian pilots to police their territory. They invested in radios and video equipment for recording group rituals and communicating with other Kayapo across their large territory, all to cultivate their common identity, ritual celebrations, and cultural survival. Traditional lip plugs and body painting remain common in village life, and group hunts keep male and female jungle survival skills honed. Yet these have been integrated alongside the adoption of Western medicine, canned foods, and business connections in the global economy (such as supplying Brazilian nut oil to the corporation The Body Shoppe). As material wealth has increased, Kayapo chiefs, while adapting to the possibilities of modern life, have been outspoken in having their group maintain their jungle traditions; like many surviving indigenous peoples, they have realized that preserving the ecological vitality of their lands is essential to guarding their sociocultural integrity.

connection with shamans, when examining the lives of the founders of the world religions, prophets as well as sages, we can notice the performance of miracles such as healing the sick and ascending to the heavens on magical flights, in both cases demonstrating the mastery of what began as the chief shamanic arts.

**white shamans:** Westerners who claim to be practitioners in a "universal" shamanic tradition

In Chapter 9, we will trace further this now-global arc of interaction between indigenous religions, their leaders, shamanism, and "**white shamans**." We will also see how the shamanic experience of trance, communication with other worlds, and spirit flight have again found their way into the syncretistic practices of many of the "new religions" that have arisen across the world.

## Conclusion

For at least the last 30,000 years, humans have evolved primarily through their cultures. Art, religious practices, and complex symbols were all present among modern *Homo sapiens* from the beginning, and all three emerged simultaneously. What should we understand from this circumstance? Religion is an essential element in the evolution of our species. It has helped humanity bond more tightly, face the unknown, hunt more effectively, and reconcile with death. Cultural historians see all these factors as having helped human groups maximize the quality of their diet, which in turn enabled them to better organize, understand, and adapt to their environment as well as to each other. With more free time, there were greater possibilities for individuals to specialize, experiment, and so introduce cultural innovations.

Evidence of religion in prehistory reflects the major concerns of our species as hunter-gatherers. Fertility was important for group survival, the need to hunt for prey was a constant and central fact, and there was ongoing concern to maintain group and gender boundaries. Indigenous religions among hunter-gatherers and early settled cultivators clearly aided group survival.

To the extent a group adopted religious beliefs and practices, that group obtained advantages compared to other groups. As a force binding communities together, as a means of being careful about the unseen, and as a decisive factor in helping human groups adapt to their environment, the world's indigenous religions point out the central issues we face in understanding the continuing and universal role of religion in later human life.

Finally, we can also discern the emergence of the first religious specialist, the shaman, who cultivates the universal human capacity for entering altered states of consciousness. Both serving and leading the people, the shaman has given human communities confidence and direction in dealing with the world's unseen forces. Shamanism is still widespread in the world today. Even where one or more of the great world religions has been adopted by a population, shamanic traditions continue to find patrons. In some cases, shamans express concepts associated with one of the now-dominant world religions (the soul, hell, the force of karma, etc.). In other instances, a shamanic cosmos exists side by side with that of a world religion. Today, shamanism is practiced "underground" if there is reason to fear persecution. In most places, however, it is integrated with the dominant world religions.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the problems in knowing and understanding the religions that existed before the development of written language?
2. How might the history of religions be written by a member of an indigenous people?
3. In many hunter-gatherer groups, the people often refer to themselves as "the true people." How might sudden awareness of the existence of other people in itself undermine the cosmos posited in such indigenous religious traditions?
4. Do you think it is valid to generalize from modern hunter-gatherers back into the past to reconstruct the origins of religion? Why or why not?
5. How might a modern shaman explain the endurance of his or her tradition and the attraction of shamanic practices by those living in modern industrial societies?
6. Some scholars have noted that the practices of modern sports fans in the West often resemble the totemic practices of indigenous peoples. Describe these commonalities in the case of your college or for a professional team such as the Chicago Bears. How do mascots and symbolic practices function to achieve group unity and individual identity?
7. Scholars who have studied tribal peoples now counsel sympathetically imagining indigenous religions as "lived through the body" and involving the entire spectrum of human perception. Explain why this approach has value, given the practices of Kung shamanism.
8. In 1985, the anthropologist Michael Harner founded the nonprofit Foundation for Shamanic Studies, which seeks to foster "greater respect for the knowledge of indigenous peoples and ultimately help to preserve and dignify this wisdom for future generations." What questions would you have for this organization, given that they also offer workshops to train Western peoples in shamanic practices?

## Key Terms

animism
Bwiti
circular time
cosmogony
Dreamtime
Ghost Dance
*Homo religiosus*
*n/um kausi*
Native American Church
numinous
sorcerers
spirit flight
spirit medium/shaman
syncretism
taboo
totem
tutelary spirit
"Venus" figurines
"white shamans"

## Suggested Readings

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## Additional Resources

Aboriginal Culture (http://www.aboriginalculture.com.au/index.shtml). A detailed site that contains information about traditional Australian Aboriginal cultures, including material culture, social organization, art, and Aboriginal religion.

Foundation for Shamanic Studies (http://www.shamanism.org/). Website by the nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving shamanic cultures and spreading their beliefs and practices across the world.

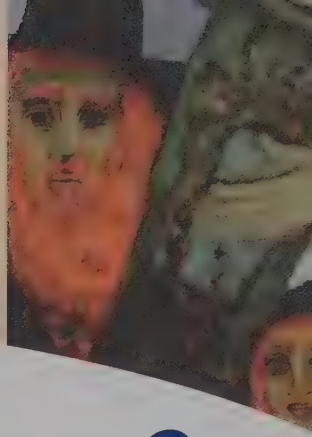
Native Languages of the Americas (http://www.native-languages.org/religion.htm). Website written by Native American scholars and practitioners, with links to other sites on a variety of themes in religion and spiritual culture.

Survival International (http://www.survivalinternational.org/). Website documenting and advocating for indigenous peoples globally.

Virtual Religion Index: American Studies (http://virtualreligion.net/vri/america.html). A rich and exhaustive listing of web resources on every aspect of Native American religious traditions.

## Notes

1. Ian Tattersall, "Once We Were Not Alone," *Scientific American*, January 2000, p. 62.
2. Summarized from Piers Vitebsky, *The Shaman* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), p. 125.
3. Quoted in Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), p. 104.
4. Quoted in Ian Austen, "Canada's Forced Schooling of Aboriginal Children Was 'Cultural Genocide,' Report Finds," *New York Times*, June 2, 2015.
5. Cited in https://www.shamanism.org/fssinfo/indigenousAssistance.html (accessed November 1, 2020).



# 3 JEWISH IDENTITY AND FAITH

## Overview

The Talmud, the great commentary on Jewish **Torah**, tells the story of a young man who was a **gentile** and was considering becoming a Jewish convert.[1] He approached one famous rabbi, Shammai, with a challenge: "Can you tell me the essence of the Torah while I stand on one leg?" Rabbi Shammai, who was known for not taking fools happily, must have thought, "The depth and breadth of Torah or even its essence, you could learn in mere moments?" He had no patience for such a frivolous request. He happened to be carrying a measuring stick and hit this ridiculous young man with it. The gentile then went to Rabbi Hillel with the same challenge, and Hillel was amenable to the task. He replied, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn it." Shortly thereafter, the man converted to Judaism (*Shabbat* 31a).

**Torah:** translates as reception, teaching, or law and represents God's revelation and commandments; can also refer to first five books of the Hebrew Bible

**gentile:** refers to someone who is not Jewish

Hillel's pithy response speaks to something of the heart of Judaism: compassion and empathy. But is this really the essence of Judaism or the Torah, or even religiously unique? Consider the following dicta from other religions:

- *Christianity:* As you wish that others would to you, do so to them (Luke 6:31)
- *Islam:* No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself (*Al-Nawani's Forty Hadiths*, 13)
- *Confucianism:* Do not do to others what you would not like yourself (*Analects*, XII.2)

◀ Hasidic Rabbi carrying the scrolls of the Torah.

- *Daoism:* The good person will regard the gains of others as if they were his own, and their losses in the same way (*Tai Sang* 3)
- *Zoroastrianism:* One's nature is only good when one shall not do to another whatever is not good for one's own self (*Dadiustan* I, *dinik*, 94:5)
- *Hinduism:* One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self (*Anusharna Parva* 113.7)
- *Buddhism:* Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful (*Udana* 5.1)

Are we really helped, then, by Hillel? What about Shammai's answer? Both actually responded well. Shammai was right that Judaism is complex and many layered. The Torah, which can be translated as *teaching* or *guidance* or *law*, was believed to have been delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai. Traditionally, this focused on 613 laws and can be found in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Pentateuch (Greek for "five books"). Many ancient Jews believed that this encapsulated the fullness of God's revelation, so much so that these first five books are also referred to as Torah. It represents the way Jews could fulfill the great command "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). Jews continued to reflect on these laws and how they might be held, and an oral tradition developed, one in which many Jews believed that the **Oral Torah** completed God's revelation. Some traditions even held that Moses received this same Oral Torah on Mount Sinai, but that it took many centuries to publicly emerge. This is a claim few scholars would embrace, but it speaks to the kind of authority Oral Torah has along with the Pentateuch.

**Oral Torah:** oral tradition that developed further understanding of the implications of the Torah

**Rabbinic Judaism:** refers to Judaism in the postbiblical premodern period

**Talmud:** compendium of laws and commentary, making up the Oral Torah

The late first century CE begins what is known as **Rabbinic Judaism**, Jewish life as it was guided by the rabbis after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of their temple. As Rabbinic Judaism established itself, it codified discussions, debates, and commentary on the Torah. This culminated in what is known as the **Talmud**. Focused both on the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, the rabbis provided a relatively consistent model for Jewish life from about the fifth century to the nineteenth century, where we find modern forms of Judaism. Ultra-Orthodox Jews see themselves as preserving this form of premodern Judaism against the onslaught of modern Jewish diversity. Shammai was right to say that the Torah is complex. Consider the commandment *Keep holy the Sabbath day* (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). How ought one to understand the implications of this single commandment? The Talmud utilizes 250 pages in a modern English translation to consider it. The tradition has great depth and is surely complex. This is what Shammai was pointing to.

Hillel's response might be taken a bit too blithely, however. To focus on compassion is to take on a posture that grounds much of the complexity of Judaism. God invites (and demands) that humans join him in healing and recreating the world. Jews can only embrace this invitation if they recognize that all of humanity is in exile together. The Torah, then, helps Jews become "light to the world" (Isaiah 42:6, 60:3). Jews do this through ***mitzvot***, sacred deeds and commandments. Hillel seems to be addressing the core of Judaism as compassion, and this is certainly one of Judaism's

***Mitzvot:*** God's commands or sacred deeds

greatest themes and a central motif in the Hebrew Bible in which the cry (*ztaaq, shava*) of the oppressed or those in need particularly moves God. The most important prophetic challenge to the people of Israel was in the form of social justice, particularly regarding those most powerless. The prophetic worldview was one in which true fasting was acting justly (Isaiah 58:1–9), reversing oppression was the only way to make the Temple holy (Jeremiah 7:3–11), and sacrificing to God without care for those in need became blasphemous (Amos 5:6–16:5). Hillel's response correlates with Rabbi Yohanan's response to the destruction of the temple:

> Once, as Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed him and beheld the Temple in ruins. "Woe to us," Rabbi Joshua cried, "That this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!" "My son," Rabbi Yohannan said to him, "be not grieved. We have another atonement as affective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, 'For I desire mercy and not sacrifice'" (Hosea 6:6).[2]

Recall Hillel's full response: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn it." To say that *the rest is commentary* is not to say that the rest in an addendum or add-on. Hillel uses the imperative: Go and learn it. This points to another central part of Rabbinic Judaism: study of the Torah. The commentary, particularly the Talmud, teaches one how to think like a Jew. To study the Torah is to investigate how God reveals himself to his chosen people. The Torah and Talmud represent God's laws and their interpretations (*halakha*) as well as narratives and explanations on Jewish life (*haggadah*). Study is crucial for Jews, because in study, one comes closest to God, who reveals himself in the Torah.

There are other ways to consider traditional Jewishness. Moses ben Maimon, a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher known as Maimonides, provided thirteen tenets that a Jew must embrace in order to be considered authentically Jewish:

1. God exists.
2. God is singular.
3. God is absolute spirit.
4. God is eternal.
5. God alone should be worshipped.
6. God has used prophets to make his revelation known.
7. Moses is God's greatest prophet.
8. All of the Torah comes from God and was given to Moses.
9. The Torah cannot be changed or superseded.
10. God knows the actions of human beings.
11. God rewards those who keep the Torah and punishes those who do not.
12. There will come a Jewish Messiah.
13. There will be a resurrection from the dead.

"I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be Your name, is not a body, and that You are free from all the accidents of matter, and that You have not any form whatsoever."

—Maimonides's third tenet of faith

# Judaism Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 1900 BCE | Approximate time for the events attributed to Abraham |
| 1280 | Time of the events attributed to Moses |
| 1240 | Conquest of land of Canaan under Joshua |
| 1020 | Monarchy begins with Saul's family, then continues with David's |
| 721 | Fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians |
| 586–538 | Fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians and return from exile |
| 167 | Maccabean Revolt |
| 63 | Roman takeover of the Holy Land |
| 67–70 CE | Jewish revolt and destruction of the second temple |
| 200–500 | Creation of the Talmud |
| 1095 | First Crusade; beginnings of pogroms—mass slaughter of European Jews |
| 1306 | Jews expelled from France; beginning of pattern repeated throughout Europe |

The interior of the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, the oldest synagogue in the United States, consecrated in 1763.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1729–1786 | Moses Mendelssohn, leading figure in forming the foundations of Reform Judaism |
| 1808–1888 | Samson Raphael Hirsch, leading figure in the emergence of Orthodox Judaism |
| 1860–1904 | Theodor Herzl, founder of modern Zionism |
| 1933–1945 | Rise and fall of Nazi Party; the Holocaust, 6 million Jews murdered |
| 1948 | Birth of the State of Israel |
| 1967 | Six-Day War |
| 1973 | Yom Kippur War, followed by growth of Ultra-Orthodox movements |
| 1979 | Camp David peace treaty between Israel and Egypt |
| 1993 | Oslo Accord |
| 1995 | Oslo II agreement, establishing an independent Palestinian Authority |
| 2012 | UN General Assembly upgrades Palestine to nonmember, observer-state status |

By the sixteenth century, Maimonides's list was published as a set of dogmatic beliefs, each of which was preceded by the affirmation, "I believe with absolute faith that . . ." One sees here that Maimonides understood Judaism as necessarily involving these beliefs. Of course, he also saw the ethical demands of Judaism as essential, and so neglecting the demands of the Torah made one a bad Jew. But to reject one of these tenets was tantamount to rejecting the essence of the faith.

## Encounter with Modernity: Modern Judaisms and the Challenge of Ultra-Orthodoxy

Consider this scenario: I was once on a panel with a Reform Jewish Rabbi and a Muslim Imam. I represented Christianity. At one point in the back-and-forth dialogue, the Rabbi said she found it odd that Christians and Muslims were so interested in the afterlife. The Imam and I agreed that this was a "big-ticket item." Last judgment and eternal life or damnation are crucial for us. We thought of them as the ultimate fulfillment of our lives' trajectories. The rabbi said that this simply did not come up as an interest in her synagogue. And it becomes further complicated in that Reform Judaism allows for a great variance of views on such things. In a given pew at a synagogue, three devout Jews might believe the following:

no afterlife, heaven and hell, and reincarnation. None of these would phase the rabbi, but it can be a little disorienting to the rest of us. For many contemporary Jews, their faith is less about orthodoxy (right belief) and more about orthopraxy (right action). And even here, deciding what, exactly, right action means with regard to ancient commandments and traditional interpretations is not obvious, resulting in the various major Jewish divisions. There are Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Jews, Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, and Reconstructionist Jews, all representing competing interpretations on what makes for an authentic Jew in the twenty-first century.

It can be just as disorienting in Jerusalem. In the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim, men wear black pants, white shirts, black jackets and coats. They also always have a **yarmulke** on their heads and frequently black hats as well. Women must have their hair covered and wear dresses that show none of their legs. On the Sabbath, sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday, everything closes down. No traffic is allowed, and everyone living there is expected to be at Friday evening and Saturday morning services. The rest of the Sabbath must be strictly observed, with no work of any kind. Yet outside such neighborhoods, many Jews walk around in Western dress, do not wear yarmulkes (ever), and do not observe the Sabbath. Many Jews even buy non-kosher meat from Palestinian butchers. They are secular Jews, those who ethnically identify as Jewish but are not religiously observant. One could even be an atheist Jew.

**yarmulke:** head covering for Jewish men

This takes us to one of the great differences between Judaism and other traditions. In every religious tradition we discuss in this book, it is assumed that those who authentically self-identify with the religion act in accord with that religion. This is not necessarily the case for Jews. One's Jewish identity might be ethnic alone, and in fact, almost half of Israeli Jews are secular Jews. In the United States, about half of self-identified Jews belong to a synagogue. Those Jews who intentionally practice their faith are known as "observant Jews." Yet even among those who are religiously observant, there is massive variety in interpreting what that observance actually means. In this chapter, we will discuss these diversities.

One of the most interesting movements, mentioned earlier, is Reconstructionist Judaism. These are Jews who are serious in keeping the Torah, but who do not necessarily consider themselves believers. We all know the claim "I'm spiritual but not religious." One Reconstructionist Jew declared in class, "I'm religious but not spiritual." The Ultra-Orthodox Jews of the Mea Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem see the diversity in Judaism as watering down religious purity. They are dedicated to preserving premodern Judaism.

The conflict created by Ultra-Orthodoxy is most evident in the state of Israel, where public life was initially shaped by secular Jews with a nonreligious, socialist–Zionist worldview. **Zionism** is a nineteenth-century Jewish secular political movement that promoted giving Jews their own national homeland. However, especially since the mid-1970s, the Ultra-Orthodox community (about 24 percent of the Israeli population) have formed increasingly influential religious parties that seek to undo

**Zionism:** nineteenth-century Jewish secular political movement that promoted giving Jews their own national homeland

this secularity and place public order under the rule of *halakhah*, the laws of premodern Talmudic Judaism.

Although a minority with considerable diversity and disagreement among themselves, the Ultra-Orthodox share in a desire to make the public life of the secular state of Israel more religiously observant. They insist, for example, that all businesses be closed on the Sabbath, and they succeeded in having the Israeli legislature pass a law requiring that all Jewish marriages be performed by Orthodox rabbis. In the eyes of the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Conservative, Reform, and secular Jews are not Jewish enough. Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox partisans have repeatedly tried to have the law that currently allows Israeli citizenship of any Jew be modified to prevent anyone who has not undergone an Orthodox conversion from being accepted for citizenship. Ultra-Orthodoxy looks a great deal like the fundamentalism that we saw in Chapter 1 as a response to modernity—that is, a fundamental rejection of it.

Judaism is, by far, the smallest of the great religions. With just 14 million adherents, mostly living in Israel and the United States, they comprise just 0.2 percent of the world's population. Yet they have had, and continue to have, a major impact on history. While Judaism is on its own an honorable tradition, it also is the father religion to Christianity and an important theological resource to Islam. All three ground their self-understanding in the historical figure of Abraham and are often understood collectively as the *Abrahamic* religions.

# Premodern Judaism: The Formative Era (2000 BCE–500 CE)

As Judaism is a religion based on the "myth of history" as noted in Chapter 1, its biblical story is crucial in understanding its identity even today.

## Biblical Roots of Judaism

As Judaism is a religion based on the "myth of history" as noted in Chapter 1, its biblical story is crucial in understanding its identity even today.

### *In the Beginning*

As noted in Chapter 1, Judaism carries its self-understanding through the myth or story of history. It finds its roots in the family of Abraham and God's purposes progressively revealed to the descendants of this family, the people of Israel. We know about this sacred story in the Hebrew Bible, known as the **Tanakh**, a shorthand term that combines the first letters of the Hebrew words for *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi'm* (Prophets), and *Khetuvim* (Writings).

**Tanakh:** name for the Jewish canon or Hebrew Bible

Judaism's story actually begins in prehistory with two brief narratives of creation. What is important about these is that much of Jewish human understanding comes from them. In the first listed story, we find God as absolute creator whose word makes the universe. "In the beginning. . . . God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light. And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:1-4). Here, God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, the model of the Jewish Sabbath. We also find that God created humanity in the divine image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), so there is something particularly sacred about humans. The second story is the familiar one of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, Noah and the flood, and so on. In this much more imaginative story, we discover humans as created through God's infusion of his breath. Thus, there is something of the divine in us. The problem was humanity's prideful desire to be literally divine. The trials and travails of humanity have everything to do with humans wanting to become what they cannot be—divine—and with the problems of sin and suffering in the world. Why is life so onerous? The answer is that it wasn't intended from the beginning to be so, but that human sin caused a rupture in the original harmony.

### *Abraham and His Descendants*

Abraham was originally from Babylonia and a city called Ur, but he emigrated to Haran (modern Turkey) and, finally, to the land of Canaan (modern Israel), where he and his wife Sarah flourished. Through God's grace, he ended up with two sons, one from Sarah's slave Hagar whom he named Ishmael and one with Sarah whom he named Isaac. Muslims trace their heritage through Ishmael, though they believe that Hagar was Abraham's wife and thus Ishmael his legitimate firstborn. Jews trace their heritage though Isaac.

Isaac and his wife Rebecca have twins, named Jacob and Esau, and God favors Jacob. At one point in Jacob's travels, he appears to meet a supernatural being who represents in some sense God, an angel, and a man. They wrestle into the night, and Jacob is rewarded with a new name, Israel, which means "one who wrestles with God." Jacob eventually has twelve sons who become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

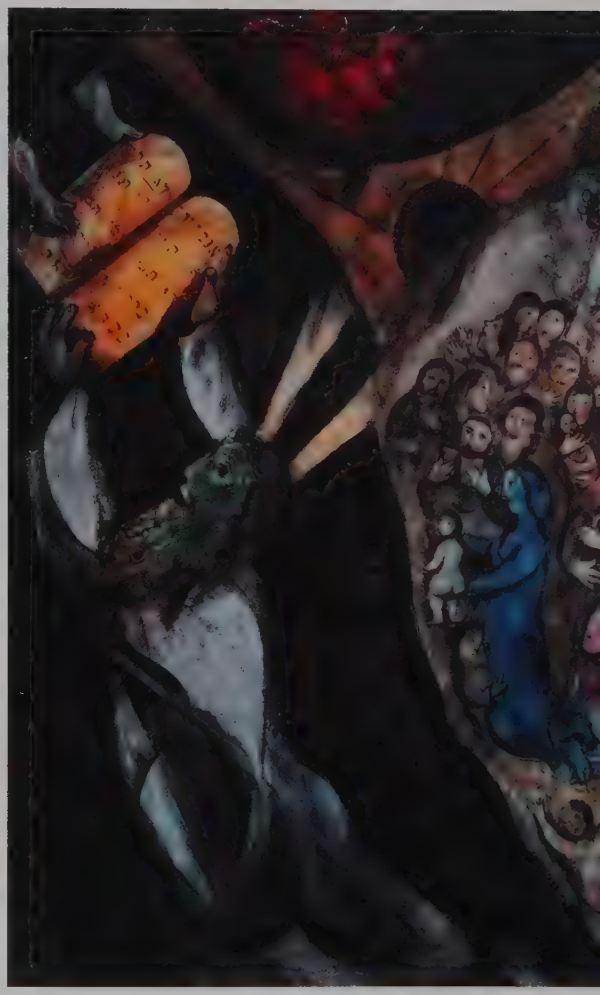
The promises of God follow this family line, but the story is fraught as all human stories are, and God's providence is actually guiding the way. Jacob's second youngest son, Joseph, was particularly favored by God and had divinely inspired dreams that created jealousy in his brothers. They plot to kill him, but ultimately sell him as a slave to merchants on their way to Egypt. Through a series of plot twists, Joseph interprets the Egyptian Pharaoh's dream of years of plenty and years of drought. In the end, Joseph enriches the Pharaoh and saves Egypt. During this time of drought, Jacob's sons travel to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph eventually reveals himself as their long-forsaken brother and invites them to live with him in Egypt.

### *Exodus (Thirteenth Century BCE)*

Genesis ends with the story of the twelve tribes prospering in Egypt, but in Exodus, things change: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful

than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore, they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor" (Exodus 1:8–11). The children of Israel are enslaved.

God raises up Moses to lead his people to freedom and back to the land of Canaan. God also reveals his name to Moses: Yahweh, which means something like "I am who am," or "I will be what I will be." With the help of God's plagues and a miraculous parting of the sea, Moses leads the tribes into Sinai, where he receives the Torah from God, a covenant where Israel would be particularly blessed by God and learn to become holy in their faithfulness to God's commandments. The tribes, over the next forty years, wander the Sinai Peninsula until, with the leadership of Joshua who replaced the recently deceased Moses, they conquer much of Canaan (Map 3.1).



In this 1953 painting, *Moses Receiving the Tablets of the Law*, the Russian painter Marc Chagall portrays Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Jews trace the beginnings of Judaism to the covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai.

## *Time of the Judges (c. 1220–1012 BCE) and the Monarchy*

The Book of Judges depicts Canaan as a loose association of city-states that are progressively conquered by the Israelites. From the thirteenth to the eleventh centuries BCE, the Israelites live as a confederated people in the Holy Land with elders ruling each modestly self-sufficient tribe. At times of national crisis—typically war—a charismatic leader arose. This was a *shofet*, which we usually translate as **judge**, and the first 200 years of Israel's life in Canaan are known as the "time of the judges." The Book of Judges ends darkly: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). This is to say that the system of confederated tribes degenerated. To further the problem, the priests of their shrine were untrustworthy, so much so that the high priest Eli transferred authority from his sons to Samuel, a young man both holy and prophetic. "And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. . . . And the word of Samuel came to all Israel" (1 Samuel 3:20–4:1). Samuel was something of a combination of high priest, judge, and prophet, someone all the tribes respected. Yet he had the same problem as Eli: "When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. . . . Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice" (1 Samuel 8:1–3).

**Judge:** leader of Jewish tribes around 1220–1012 BCE

Map 3.1 The route of Exodus.

The people demanded a king so that they might be like other nations. Samuel is led by God to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel. But Saul disappoints God by not following God's directives, and God ultimately rejects Saul and tells Samuel to anoint a shepherd boy named David. Through the next several years, we see how David comes to replace Saul. In a military standoff with the Philistines, David convinces Saul to let him take on the giant Goliath, whom he slays. David then became Saul's general and son-in-law. But Saul is jealous of David, and David flees the palace with mercenaries. Eventually, David comes to rule the south of Canaan. With the deaths of Saul and his son, the northern tribes ask David to become their king. He consolidates his rule in Jerusalem, his new capital.

David's reign is considered something of a golden age in Israel's history. He consolidated the tribes, expanded the kingdom, and made other small neighboring nations

vassal states. He is noted in the Bible as both deeply faithful to God, but also sometimes as quite sinful. One of the most theologically important events in David's life is when he consults his personal prophet Nathan on whether he should build a temple for God. God reveals that his son Solomon will do so. In this revelation to Nathan, God promises to David that his dynasty would last forever: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:6). Solomon's rule followed David's, and he went on a great building spree, expanding Jerusalem and building a temple for God. But Solomon lived lavishly while his people suffered, and when he died, the northern tribes revolted and established their own kingdom. Thus, the tribes of Israel became two different nations: the kingdom of Israel in the north and the kingdom of Judah in the south. David's dynasty did survive, however, and would maintain itself for the next 400 years in Judah.

In 721 BCE, the Assyrians conquered Israel, exiling its inhabitants. This may be why the name for God's people is Jews, since only Judah survived, though as a vassal state. In 621 BCE, Judah's king, Josiah, initiated a religious reform that included renewing the covenant with God and designating that the temple in Jerusalem would be the only temple proper for sacrifices. But the people's faithfulness to the covenant waned. At about this same time, the Babylonians conquered Assyria, and by 598 BCE, they invaded Judah, eventually destroying Jerusalem and its temple. Much of the population was exiled to Babylonia. Thus, David's dynasty collapsed. Psalm 137:1 speaks to the tragedy: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept." The Babylonian dynasty did not last long. The Persians conquered the Babylonians, and in 539 BCE, the Persian king Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Judah and even financed its rebuilding. This era, from 539 BCE to 70 CE, is known as the **Second Temple Period**.

**Second Temple Period:** time after Jews returned from Babylonian exile to Roman destruction of the second temple in 70 CE

In 334 BCE, Alexander the Great of Greece crossed into the Middle East, and by 326 BCE, he had conquered the Persian Empire, extending his own empire to the Indus River in modern-day India. This is the beginning of **Hellenization** ("Hellas" being another name for Greece), the policy of conquered countries taking on Greek language and culture. This empire would not last long, however. Alexander died in 323 BCE, and his generals divided the empire into three kingdoms. For Jews, the most important of these was the Ptolemy kingdom centered in Egypt and the Seleucid kingdom controlling the Middle East. The Holy Land was between the two, first being controlled by the Ptolemy kingdom and then, in 198 BCE, by the Seleucid. By around 170 BCE, the Seleucids demanded that Jews renounce their religion and take on Hellenization completely. They revolted through the leadership of Judas Maccabeus, and for the first time since the sixth century BCE, Jews controlled the Holy Land. Judas's royal family line was known as the Hasmoneans.

**Hellenization:** imposition of Greek culture on lands conquered by Alexander the Great

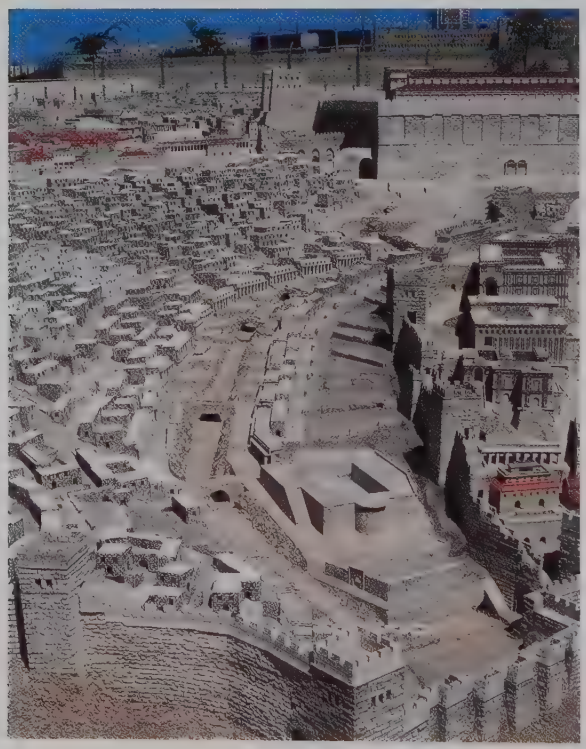
In 63 BCE, the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem and began what would be a 700-year occupation. The Romans installed Herod the Great as a client king over all of the Holy Land, and he ruled from 37 to 4 BCE. At his death, his kingdom was divided among three sons; Archelaus, who ruled Idumea, Judea, and Samaria until he was deposed and replaced by Roman governors; Antipas, who ruled Galilee and Peraea; and Philip, who ruled the regions northeast of Galilee and southern Syria.

### *Prophets*

Throughout these various versions of the Jewish and non-Jewish monarchies, surely the king's rule dominated the lives of the people. But another influence was powerful as well, that of the prophet. The principal Hebrew term for prophet is *nabi* (one who announces). A prophet was also known as a *hozeh* (visionary) and *roeh* (seer). In the ancient period, a prophet was one who interpreted the signs of the times in light of God's covenant and the traditions of the day. We often think of prophets as foretelling the future, and some did at times. More typically, they represented a moral and religious voice to the people and leaders. Some of the most renowned prophets, such as Isaiah, were court prophets who interpreted God's will for both people and palace. Others challenged both the people and palace.

Two issues dominated the prophets' concerns. The first was authentic worship. Most ancient Israelites were polytheists, who believed that a number of gods existed, even if Yahweh was the high God. Thus, the people and sometimes their Jewish kings worshipped other gods along with Yahweh, particularly Baal and Astarte. Prophets denounced this worship, and by the time of Jeremiah (sixth century BCE), prophets typically told people that other gods simply did not exist. Prophets also challenged worship when they thought it violated covenantal terms. The second issue that dominated their attention was that of social justice. Prophets spoke out against exploitation of the weak and poor. The disparity between poor and rich was outrageous to them, as it undermined both the covenant and the common good.

A model of the city of Jerusalem centered around the temple as it might have looked in 50 CE.



Sometimes prophets even conflated these issues so that ritual worship was blasphemous in light of social inequities. Isaiah speaks for God: "I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates. . . . Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. . . . Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:13–17).

Prophets also envisioned a restoration, when not only would justice "flow like the river" but David's dynasty would be reestablished. There is no question that the greatest tragedy in ancient Judaism was the fall of Jerusalem. David had been promised his dynasty would last *forever*. But with the Babylonian destruction of Judah, it seemed as though God had abandoned them and his promise. *Messiah* is the Jewish term for "anointed," typically referring to the king, and

many Jews looked for a time when David's rule would return, a time of an authentic messiah. This is even reflected in one of Maimonides's tenets: There will come a Jewish messiah.

## Rabbinic Judaism

### *Background*

In the first century CE, Jewish historian Josephus tells us that, in addition to the common people, there were sects or movements in Judaism. These were the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and the *fourth philosophy*.

The first three began as protest movements against the Hasmonean kingdom, including the fact that the Hasmoneans placed their own family members as high priests and, surprisingly, were rather Hellenistic in their rule. The most dramatic movement was the Essenes, who formed a community near the Dead Sea and awaited both a political messiah and a priestly messiah who would cleanse Israel and begin a messianic age. By the first century, and under Roman rule, the Pharisees numbered about 6,000. The term *Pharisee* literally means "separated ones." They saw themselves as leading the charge for Jews to live particularly holy lives, to resist Hellenization, and to distinguish Jewish culture and religion from foreign influences. They were the most popular group of religious leaders among the common people and the most open to the theological developments that emerged from the ancient period, including accepting the fullest canon of the Tanakh, anticipating a messiah, as well as a last judgment and resurrection of the just. The Sadducees represented the noble class, the priesthood, and most of the members of the Jewish court (Sanhedrin). This was a theologically conservative group, which only accepted the Pentateuch as scripture and thus did not anticipate such things as a messiah or resurrection. None of that can be found in the Pentateuch.

The fourth philosophy is also known as the *zealots*. This was a group that sought national independence by armed conflict against the Romans. We could also mention, though Josephus does not, the *Samaritans*. This was a group of Jews who developed an alternative form of Judaism, including their own priesthood and temple. Jews of all other stripes rejected this form of Judaism and wanted to have little to do with them.

In 67 CE, Jews revolted against Rome. By the time the revolt was put down in the year 70, the temple was destroyed, and the Sadducee, Zealot, and Essene movements were no more. The only surviving religious leadership was the Pharisees. It is this leadership that formed a new kind of Judaism, one where temple worship was replaced entirely by Torah fidelity. The Roman authorities gave them permission to establish an academy at Yavneh, on the coast of present-day Israel. There, they began the task of reconstructing Judaism for a new period of exile apart from the land and temple.

The Pharisee movement did not start from scratch. Since the Babylonian exile, many Jews lived in the **diaspora**—that is, outside of their homeland. By the first century CE, in fact, the majority did not live in the Holy Land. They focused their

**Diaspora:** the dispersion of a religious people outside their geographic homeland

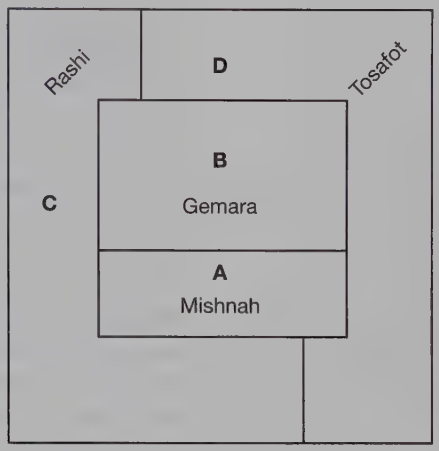
religious observance not on temple worship, but on synagogue gatherings. This is where the Oral Torah grew and developed. The Hebrew Bible had been translated and disseminated in the Greek language and used throughout the Hellenized empire; this is the **Septuagint**. Further, the Pharisees transferred the priestly rituals from temple worship to a system of ethics. For centuries, the prophets had issued demands for justice and mercy. The Pharisees took these demands and made them the content for the priestly rituals of holiness, working out their application in all the details of everyday life according to the oral tradition.

**Septuagint:** Hebrew Bible translated into Greek and disseminated throughout the Jewish diaspora

As noted, between the second and fifth centuries CE, Rabbinic Judaism, with both written and Oral Torah, took to systematizing discussions, debates, and conclusions about the Torah into a massive commentary called the Talmud. There were actually two Talmuds, the Palestinian and the Babylonian, with the latter being the longest and, eventually, the most authoritative. Talmud means "study," and it includes the *Mishna* (repetition) and the *Gemara* (supplement). The Mishna posed a certain commandment and initial interpretations, and the Gemara was commentary on that. The commentary is extensive and reveals layers of discussion on how to apply the commandments. It also includes material beyond the Gemara, including debates, decisions, unsolved conflicts of interpretation, and even stories. This is "Tosafot" consisting of medieval

The Talmud records the ongoing discussion of Torah by the great rabbinic minds across the ages and is meant to be studied and debated in a communal setting.

additions. The Talmud provided medieval Judaism with law and interpretation as well as material that inspired the Jewish religious imagination. The rabbis challenged themselves with the task of thoroughly interpreting the Torah, including two types of interpretations: legal decisions or arguments (*Halakhah*) and folklore, theological arguments, ritual traditions, sermons, and spirituality (*Haggadah*).




A page of the Talmud.

We began our chapter with a story of rabbis Shammai and Hillel in dialogue with the gentile young man. This comes out of the Talmud. It also reflects an ongoing debate in the Talmud between these two schools of thought: the house of Shammai (*Bet Shammai*) and the house of Hillel (*Bet Hillel*). Both, according to the Talmud, regularly clashed in their interpretation of law and what it meant to be an authentic Jew. And both schools are happily preserved in the Talmud. Both schools provided medieval Jewry with ways of thinking about the Torah, the community, Jewish identity, and so on. The Talmudic tradition shaped Jewish life from the sixth century up until the modern period. The heart of the teachings of the Pharisees was that God was a loving, personal Lord who chose the Israelites and entered into the covenant with them. This covenant, revealed in the written and Oral Torah, teaches that every individual who keeps it can live in hope of the resurrection of the dead. While the Christian scriptures depict the Pharisees as an obsessively legalistic (and hypocritical) movement, what they typically taught was that God wanted not sacrifices but deeds of loving kindness rooted in a pure heart.

"If water, which is soft, could hollow out the hard stone, the words of the Torah, which are hard, will certainly make an impression on my soft heart."

—Rabbi Akiva

"The world is suspended in space and has nothing to rest on except the breath of Torah study from the mouths of students—just as a man may keep something up in the air by the blowing of his breath."

—Talmud

A page of the Torah in Hebrew, illustrating the use of a pointer called a *yad* (Hebrew for "hand") to follow the text.

# Premodern Judaism: The Classical Era (500–1729)

## Persecutions

The rabbinic worldview of Talmudic life continued through the medieval period, but this was precarious and had been for centuries prior. As early as the late first century, Christians were distancing themselves from their parent religion. And from the fourth century on, Christianity had become the favored and then state religion of the Roman Empire. Laws restricting Jews became common. In the West, Jews were regarded with suspicion and considered "Christ killers." With the rise of Islam, Jews did much better in Muslim lands. Islam has always considered Jews and Christians, along with themselves, as "people of the book"—that is, people who received God's revelation, albeit a limited and distorted one. Thus, in the Muslim-conquered lands of the Middle East, Spain, and North Africa, the Jewish presence was tolerated fairly well. The Abbasid dynasty in modern-day Iraq became a center of philosophy, science, and medicine, and Jews became part of that intellectual flourishing. This "golden age" did not last long, however, as non-Muslims increasingly were heavily taxed and even some synagogues converted into mosques. Spain was another place of Jewish flourishing, particularly in cities like Cordoba and Castile, which were intellectual centers for Muslims, Jews, and Christians under Islamic rule.

For the most part, European Jews had to rely on whether or not a given king or magistrate was tolerant, and that could vacillate seemingly on a whim. For example, the Frankish kings who founded the Holy Roman Empire (800 CE) initially supported a Jewish presence. Jews held high positions in the courts and professions. Many prospered under so-called diplomas of protection from the king's court. Because they did not naturally enjoy full citizenship, however, they often suffered a lack of protection.

**Ashkenazi:** Jews whose traditions originated in central and eastern Europe

**Sephardic:** Jews whose traditions originated in Spain and Portugal

Jews were simply understood as "outsiders" in medieval society. They called themselves **Ashkenazi** Jews—that is, European—in contrast to **Sephardic** Jews of the Middle East and Africa. By law, they lived in their own neighborhoods and maintained their own affairs and institutions. There, they went to synagogue, were led by a rabbi and court for religious affairs, had their own shops, and so on. In Germany, they even developed their own language, Yiddish, a combination of Hebrew and German. In the thirteenth century, however, decrees by rulers and the Catholic Church altered their lives greatly. Strict district restrictions were imposed on them whereby they had to live in ghettos or specific towns and needed exceptions to travel outside them. They had to wear distinctive clothing or a yellow badge marking them as Jews. Further, they were excluded from many crafts and trades by the guilds that controlled them. The Christian European imagination saw them as suspicious, even spreading rumors that they kidnapped Christian children to use their blood in rituals and that

they desecrated hosts used in the Eucharist for bizarre, secret rites. Such rumors often led to riots and massacres.

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Jews were expelled from France and England (Map 3.2). Massacres occurred in Germany in 1298, destroying 140 Jewish communities. When the Black Plague hit Europe, Jews were accused of poisoning city wells. Jews themselves had fewer plague casualties than Christians. Thus, they were suspect, even though the lower death toll was certainly due to their cultural habits of cleanliness that Christians did not practice. In 1492, the very year that Columbus sailed to the Americas, Spain required that Jews and Muslims either convert to Christianity or suffer expulsion. Somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 Jews were forced to flee. Those who did convert (**conversos**) were suspected of doing so on false pretenses and were often persecuted; many were burned at the stake. One cannot help but see the parallels of the medieval treatment of Jews to the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust.

**Conversos:** Jews who converted to Christianity by threat of expulsion

## Jewish Intellectualism and Mysticism

The medieval period knew many outstanding Jewish thinkers. Samuel ibn Naghrilla (b. 993), the grand vizier of Granada, wrote an influential introduction to the Talmud. Judah ha-Levi (1075–1141) was a widely respected physician as well a noted poet and philosopher. Moses ibn Gikatella (c. 900) was a biblical scholar who advanced theories of biblical criticism that predated Christian usage by almost 1000 years. Moses ben Nachman (1195–1270) was a Talmudic authority, philosopher, and leader of Spanish Jewry best known for successfully defending Judaism in a debate before the king of Aragon. Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (b. 1040), known as Rashi, wrote commentaries on the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud; these appeared in the first printed edition of the Talmud and have been in all editions since. Rashi also founded an influential Talmudic academy in Troyes, France.

Perhaps the most known Jewish intellectual in the medieval period was Maimonides (1135–1204), whose thirteen tenets of Jewish belief was mentioned earlier in the chapter. Maimonides was a physician, theologian, and philosopher. His compendium of Talmudic law, the *Mishna Torah*, was at the time the most influential guide to Torah commentary in Judaism. Maimonides's understanding of Jewish law followed a strict form of rationalism and was expressed as aligned with the natural sciences of the day. His most famous work was *Guide of the Perplexed*, where he frames Jewish teaching in terms of Aristotelian categories. He was so conversant in ancient Greek philosophy, Islamic philosophy, and Jewish theology that his *Guide of the Perplexed* was read by Christians and Muslims as well as by Jews. The great Catholic philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas cites him freely as a source in his own writings.

The medieval period was also a fruitful time for Jewish mystical speculation. There are mystical traditions in virtually every religion where spiritual virtuosos attempt some form of union with God or Ultimate Reality. Here, the mystic does

Map 3.2 Jews in Christian Europe.

Areas of Jewish communities
Expulsions, with date
Major centers of resettlement
Main ghettos, with date established
Centers of disputations between Jews and Christians
LITHUANIA
BALTIC SEA
1495
1495
1495
1445
Grodno
Bialystok
POLAND
SILESIA
Pinsk
Brest-Litovsk
Posen pre-1532
Chernigov
Kharkow
1016
1016
1350
Kalisz
Lódź
Radom
Lublin
Luck
Zhitomir
Kazimierz 1494
Lemberg
Tarnopol
1159
Cracow
Vienna 1570
1421
Kishinev
Buda
1279
1349–1360
HUNGARY
1016
BLACK SEA
Trebizond
Nicopolis
Spalato
Cattaro
Adrianople
Constantinople
late 11th century
1016
Salonica
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
Corfu
Smyrna
Patras
1532
Modon
pre–1481
Rhodes
1310–1522
CYPRUS
Damascus
Safed
CRETE
Jerusalem
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Alexandria
Cairo

**Kabbalah:** Jewish mystical theory and practice

**Zohar:** Massive Jewish biblical commentary that details full expression of kabbalistic thought

not necessarily seek spiritual experiences per se but God directly, or at least as directly as a given religion imagines possible. The most important Jewish mystical tradition is **Kabbalah**, a complex and controversial attempt to understand the nature of God as manifest, the structure of the universe, the spiritual structure of the soul, and spiritual transformation and union with God. Kabbalah developed in the late medieval period, particularly with the publication of the *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*) by Moses de Leon (1250–1305). The **Zohar** is a massive commentary on the Torah, and it contains much of the foundations of kabbalistic thinking. Later important influences came from Isaac Luria (1534–1572).

Jewish mysticism has an ancient history. The Bible describes Moses's relationship to God variously. On the one hand, when Moses asks God to see his face, God tells him that "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Thus, God covered Moses's face and "passed by." On the other hand, "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). Other texts in Exodus seem to play with this ambiguity. Clearly, what we are led to imagine is that God and Moses shared a profound intimacy. Other prophets did as well, including Isaiah and Ezekiel, both having entered the divine abode in a prophetic state. Isaiah writes:

> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke (Isaiah 6:1–5).

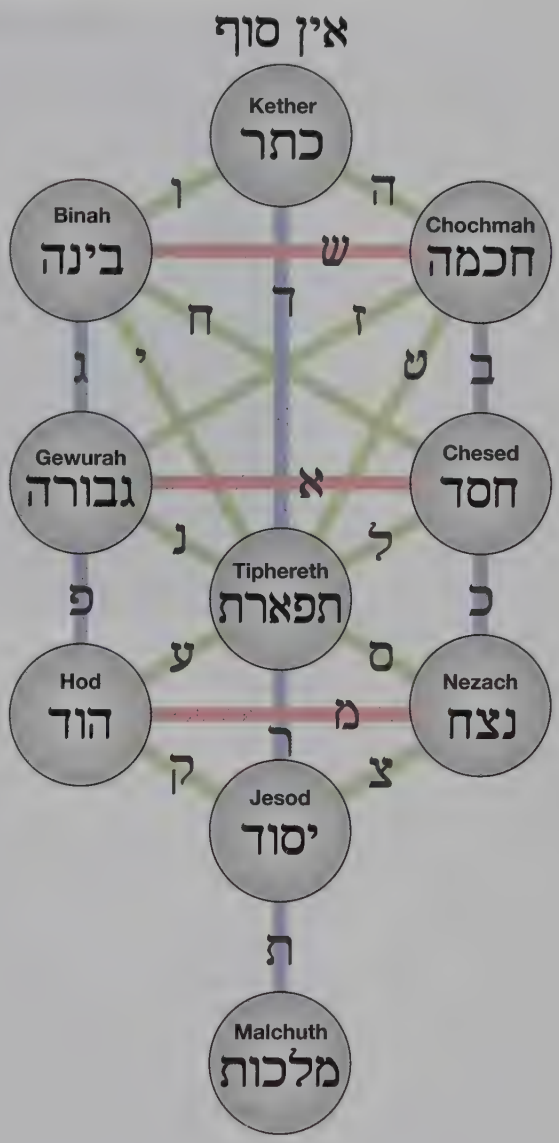
Ezekiel experienced a very complicated version of entering the divine glory, including lightning, fire, and four creatures with four faces, wheels for feet, and eyes on all parts of their bodies. His account ends with:

> Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of the Lord rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud rumbling; it was the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them, that sounded like a loud rumbling. The spirit lifted me up and bore me away; I went in bitterness in the heart of my spirit, the hand of the Lord being upon me (Ezekiel 2:12–14).

We even find in 2 Kings that the prophet Elijah did not die, but rather was taken up into heaven by "a chariot of fire and horses of fire . . . and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11).

Jewish tradition reflected on these and imagined that it was possible, by God's grace, to enter into the direct presence of God. The ancient tradition had versions

known as the *merkavah* (chariot) and *hekhalot* (heavenly halls) traditions. Versions of the possibility of spiritual ascent or entering various divine palaces formed something of an early Jewish mysticism between 100 BCE and 1000 CE. Some traditions held there were three levels of ascent, while others held there were seven. St. Paul, in the New Testament, describes having been taken up into the "third heaven." He was "caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Corinthians 12:4). Here, Paul is alluding to this tradition as a way of describing a profound encounter with the divine. This tradition included learning how to negotiate each level of ascent and the kinds of piety, prayers, chants, and ritual actions that are necessary to move from one level to another. All this was taught privately, and only to those imagined worthy. It was fraught as well, as one might enter a level beyond one's spiritual capacity with potentially deadly results. The most famous texts we have are the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and the *Pirkei Hekhalot Rabbati*. Somewhere between the third and sixth centuries, the *Sefer Ha-Yesirah* was created that lays out the foundations for medieval mystical speculations.



The *sefirot* pattern.

While there is no single Kabbalah system, it generally teaches the following. Before the creation of the physical world, God, who is absolute spirit and cannot be known, manifested himself in a pattern known as the *sefirot* (literally "numbers"). This emanation of the divine is not God exactly, who is beyond any conceptualizations or participation in the created world, but the *sefirot* cannot be divorced from God either. This is what God *as manifest* looks like, and it is the spiritual superstructure of the universe. The mystic's challenge is to ascend the *sefirot* pattern by learning the secrets of each given *sefirah*. The mystic learns to master and embody the truth of each *sefirah*, progressively ascending to the source of the divine emanation, which is God. Some of the secrets of the *sefirot* pattern are given in scripture, but often only discovered through making spiritual and theological associations of key words or phrases, particularly as they represented numbers that could be manipulated. For example, King David's name would be DVD (no vowels in ancient written Hebrew). Here, D = 4, V = 6, and D = 4, for a total of fourteen. As seven is a sacred number meaning fullness,

David's name is double fullness. A simple association would be to look for other words that add up to fourteen, but typically, it was far more complicated and, critics would charge, potentially arbitrary.

## Hasidism

The mystical impulse of the Kabbalah was embodied in the Hasidic movement. Hasidism began in Eastern Europe as a response to European Jewry's depressed exhaustion from the region's persecutions. It also acted as a critique of dry scholasticism in mainstream Judaism. It began in Poland with the ministry of Israel ben Eliezer, who was popularly known as Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name). Under Eliezer, devout practice was integrated with an ecstatic sense of religiosity. The Hasidic movement replaced the rabbi scholar with the *rebbe*, or "master," who now guided his followers by virtue of his spiritual power and holiness. *Hasidut* means piety, so the *Hasidim* are the *pious ones*, and the *rebbe* is the pious among the pious. The *rebbe* came to be understood as a *tsaddik*, literally a "righteous person," who could mediate intimacy with God.

According to the great modern Jewish thinker Elie Wiesel, Jews "had good reason to doubt the absolute power of rationalism. So they turned inward and became mystical."[3] Baal Shem Tov was the model. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes him thus: "He takes unto himself the quality of fervor. He arises from sleep with fervor, for the is hallowed . . . and is worthy to create and become like the Holy One."[4] Stories about the power of *rebbes* are legion. Some were supposed to be telepathic; others could interpret the past or future; most of all, they had power in heaven. Of Baal Shem Tov it was written, "He would intercede on people's behalf and heaven would submit to his will." The story goes that Rebbe Israel Maggid always had his prayers obeyed by heaven, except one night. He was shocked and demanded an explanation. When he received it, he understood and *forgave* God. What happened was that Rebbe Naphtali had come to the rescue of a wedding party that, owing to a family tragedy, was laden with a sad spirit. He entered the gathering, charmed them, amused them, and led them in songs of love. Like the wedding guests, the angels in heaven fell completely under his spell. Thus, they were not paying attention that night to other prayers. Jewish critics of the Hasidic movement warn that the romantic tales of *rebbes* such as these are often just that, merely tales, and need to be balanced with concerns about the autocratic powers *rebbes* have in their communities.

The Hasidic imagination is particularly significant in relation to Kabbalah, which was preserved and advanced most in the Hasidic movement. Hasidism is a form of orthodoxy, and it thrives in tightly knit communities of Jews around the leadership of the *rebbe*. Gershom Scholem, a key scholar of Jewish mysticism, insists that it is not a movement that went outside Jewish law or traditional interpretations. Rather, it integrated those interpretations into a system of great joy, celebration, and spiritual density. Through the Hasidic movement, and particularly due to the popularizing writings of Buber, Wiesel, and others, the modern Jewish imagination is flush with new life.

Observant Jews, like this young man putting on *tefillin*, declare God's oneness by binding the Torah scrolls to their bodies before daily prayer.

## Sabbath and Synagogue

### *Sabbath*

Perhaps the most important holy day for Judaism is the weekly Sabbath (Shabbat), starting at sundown Friday evening and concluding at sundown Saturday. The Genesis creation account (1:1–2:4) describes God creating the universe in six days and resting on the seventh, clearly a model for the Jewish Sabbath as a day of rest. One should not, however, imagine that Sabbath refers merely to resting from a long workweek. According to Jewish theology, the Sabbath is something that God actually created; specifically, he created *menuha*, a Hebrew word usually translated as "rest." More profoundly, it refers to tranquility, peace, and repose. In the biblical mind, *menuha* is the same as harmony, and even stillness. Consider this: God reckoned the first six days of creation as "good," but the Sabbath he deemed blessed and holy (Genesis 2:3).

The great modern Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel describes Sabbath as a taste of eternity, a day of *being* instead of *doing*. He argues that unless one learns how to cultivate a contemplative soul and relish the Sabbath while still in the world, one would be unable to enjoy eternity in the world to come. Throughout the history of Jewish theology, the Sabbath has been personified and given names such as *bride* or *queen*. There is even a popular Sabbath hymn, *Lecha Dodi Likrat Kallah* ("Come, My Beloved, to Meet the [Sabbath] Bride"). Symbolically, the destiny of Israel is to be the groom of this sacred day, and in cleaving to the Sabbath, one cleaves to

## RITUALS AND RITES: Rituals of the Life Cycle

Most religions celebrate life transitions and rites of passage, and Judaism is no different. Many of its major rituals concern these.

### Bris or Brit Milah

The great sign of the covenant according to the teaching of the Torah is the *Bris*, or circumcision. We find in the Book of Genesis where God made a covenant with Abraham and then proclaimed, "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . when he is eight days old" (17:9–10). This ceremony is known as the *bris* or *brit milah* (literally "covenant of circumcision"). During the ritual, the child is named, and the foreskin of his penis is cut off as an external sign of the covenant.

### Bar and Bat Mitzvah

When a boy reaches thirteen, what is traditionally considered adulthood, he is a candidate to become a ***bar mitzvah***, or "son of the commandments." He will now be expected to carry out his religious responsibilities in the community. The preparation is modestly challenging. He has to undergo training by his rabbi in the study of Hebrew, Torah, and Talmud. Typically, this takes many months. He is then called forth at the synagogue service to read from the Torah. Once he has completed this ceremony, he is considered to be an adult. In the modern period, with the developments of Reform and Conservative forms of Judaism, this ceremony became open to girls as well. They go through a similar training and become a *bat mitzvah*, or "daughter of the commandments." This is a highlight in many Jewish families, and after the service, the now young man or woman typically is thrown a lavish party to celebrate.

### Marriage

Judaism emphasizes marriage and family life. The Talmud even proclaims that an unmarried man is only half a man. The Jewish wedding ceremony takes place under a *huppah*, a large shawl stretched out on four poles. This symbolizes a mediation between heaven and creation. The groom and bride stand as an image of Adam and Eve. In the ceremony, prayers and blessings sanctify the union by binding them both to each other and to Israel's history, from creation to the exile to a joyous redemption in the messianic age. The ceremony ends with the groom stepping on a glass, representing the sorrow of the fall of the second temple. Immediately after, all shout out *Mazel Tov* ("good luck")!

### Death

Jewish death practices intend to advance the deceased soul to the next world and to comfort those who are mourning. To the first end, a person facing death is encouraged to say a prayer of confession, asking for forgiveness and healing. The prayer also asks that the person's death serve as atonement for all of his or her sins. The prayer ends with "Grant me a share in the world to come" and "Protect my beloved family." Burial rights take place on the day of death or the day after, without embalming the body. Following this, the immediate family spends seven days at home, known as keeping *shiva*. There, they continue to support each other. They will further recite memorial prayers (*kaddish*) for eleven months and thereafter on the anniversary of the death.

## RITUALS AND RITES: Holy Days

Judaism follows the lunar calendar of annual holy days, many of which celebrate and connect modern Jews with their ancient history. Collectively, they infuse the Jewish community and its members with their collective identity.

### Major Holy Days

#### Rosh Hashanah (New Year)

The spiritual year begins with Rosh Hashanah, a spiritual renewal in remembrance of God's original creation. It is celebrated on the first two days of the seventh month (around the fall equinox). In preparation, for each of the thirty days prior to Rosh Hashanah a ram's horn (*shofar*) is blown in the morning synagogue service to remind people that they stand before God. During Rosh Hashanah, the story of creation is told, and people are reminded that God is deciding who and who will not be written in the book of life for another year. It raises questions of life, death, and the need self-examination.

#### Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Ten days after the New Year's services Judaism engages in the holy day of Yom Kippur, a day of fasting and repentance for the sins committed in the past year. It is also a time of renewal of the covenant God made with his chosen people. In the ancient period, this was the only time the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple, in order to seek the forgiveness of the people. Today, the emphasis is on personal cleansing and renewal.

#### Pesach (Passover)

Passover recalls God's deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian slavery in the time of Moses. Today, this festival is celebrated by more Jews than any other ritual. Passover is really a week-long memorial, but it concentrates itself on the *Seder* meal at week's end. Here, Jews eat a number of highly symbolic foods such as unleavened bread (*matzot*), which takes them back to the Exodus event; bitter herbs (*maror*), which reminds them of bitter slavery; chopped nuts and fruits (*charoset*), symbolizing the mortar they were compelled to make by their Egyptian taskmasters; and a bone (*z'roa*), which is left on the plate as a symbol of God's mighty arm. By chewing the bitter herbs, for example, one's palate sympathetically recognizes the bitterness being recalled. After these various symbolic foods are eaten during the telling of the story of the Exodus, a full family meal of celebration is eaten.

### Minor Holy Days

#### Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles)

Five days after Yom Kippur, the feast of tabernacles is celebrated. This is a reminder to Jews of their forty-year wandering in the desert of Sinai after they had received the Torah but before they entered the Promised Land. Here, temporary dwellings are made, often in the yard or patio, where Jews eat their meals and may even sleep. It is a concrete reminder that they depend on God as their ancestors did.

#### Shavout (Feast of Weeks)

Initially, the Feast of Weeks was a Jewish harvest festival that God commanded in Exodus 34, falling sometime in May or June. Far more importantly, it became a festival celebrating the reception of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

#### Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an eight-day festival of light, symbolizing hope. It commemorates the second century BCE revolt led by the Maccabee family that ousted their Syrian overlords, who had demanded that the children of Israel renounce their faith. The temple had

*continued*

## RITUALS AND RITES: Holy Days *continued*

been desecrated and repurposed for the worship of Zeus. When Judas Maccabeus retook Jerusalem, he rededicated the temple. According to a story in the Talmud, they only had enough oil to keep the temple menorah lit for a single day. But miraculously, the menorah stayed lit for eight days. It was a sign of God's providence and faithfulness.

### Purim

Purim is by far the most raucous of all Jewish festivals. It commemorates the story of Queen Esther, the Jewish spouse to the Persian king. Haman, the king's right-hand man, was set on destroying all Jews in the Persian dynasty for failing to bow to the king (or to him). Esther pleads with the king on behalf of her people. Haman, seeing she has persuaded the king, falls down before her begging for his life. Thinking Haman was sexually assaulting her, the king ended up killing Haman on the very cross that Haman had devised to kill Esther's uncle. During Purim, everyone dresses up in costumes representing characters in the story, they loudly cheer and boo as the story is read, and the party carries on with games and dance.

God. According to the Talmud, on the eve of the Sabbath the Lord gives humanity *neshamah yeterah*, "additional spirit" or "increased soul," and, at its conclusion, takes it away. Thus, Jews are particularly challenged to take advantage of this day.

A typical Sabbath might look like this: By Friday afternoon, observant Jews begin to return home for Sabbath preparations. The family bathes and dresses well, and the best dishes and tableware are set for a meal. Several minutes before sunset, the female head of the house lights two Sabbath candles and recites a blessing. The family then goes to synagogue for a brief service, after which they come home to a festive dinner. The male head of the house recites a blessing (*Kiddush*) over the wine, sanctifying the Sabbath, and a prayer over the bread—traditionally, two loaves of sweet bread called *challah*. The meal is long, leisurely, and ends with a prayer and often singing. After dinner, the family talks, reads, studies Torah, and so on. The next day, the morning service usually begins at 9:00 a.m. and often continues for more than two hours. Afterward, the family enjoys another leisurely meal that usually has been prepared in advance and is reheated. The afternoon is spent studying Torah, taking walks, or perhaps napping. Sabbath ends at nightfall when three stars are visible. At the conclusion, the family performs a concluding ritual called a *Havdalah* (separation). Blessings recited include one that formally recognizes the distinction between the Sabbath just celebrated and the rest of the week.

### *The Synagogue*

**synagogue:** community centered on prayer and study of Torah; the building in which the community meets for these activities

In the ancient period, synagogues developed for Jews living outside of Jerusalem and its temple. This would of course be important for the majority of Jews living throughout outside the Holy Land. After the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the **synagogue** was universally the central place for worship and study. Today, in Orthodox synagogues men and women worship separately, while in Conservative and Reform synagogues

they worship together. A ***minyan***, or minimum number of men necessary to have a service, has traditionally been ten. All the main branches of Judaism share the basic worship structure: They gather as a minyan in the central synagogue space of worship, sing hymns and prayers often led by a cantor, hear scriptures, and listen to a sermon from the rabbi.

The place where the Hebrew Bible is stored is called an **ark**, in reference to the ancient Ark of the Covenant. This is a recess in the synagogue wall nearest to Jerusalem. The text is a scroll that is ornately covered. When the scroll is taken out during the service, everyone stands and sings. The readers use a special pointer, often made out of silver, to keep their place while reading and to keep themselves from touching the holy scroll with their hands. After the reading, the scroll is rolled up, covered, and replaced inside the ark with respectful solemnity.

# Judaism and Modernity (1729–1967)

Thus far we have seen the ancient and medieval forms of Judaism that inform the present day. That represents the foundations for the following discussion. We will see how various forms of Judaism reflect its tradition and wrestle with modernity.

## The Emergence of Modern Religious Forms of Judaism

Prior to the modern period, every form of Judaism carried with it a relatively universally agreed set of practices and identity. Even Hasidism was recognized by non-Hasidic Jews as legitimate. The following descriptions of various modern expressions of Judaism sometimes deeply reflect this continuity and sometimes veer dramatically from it.

### *Reform Judaism*

As we have seen, Rabbinic Judaism from the early Talmudic period until the modern period was relatively standard throughout Europe and the Middle East. In many ways, it was a robust religious and community life, and there are numerous examples of Jewish intellectuals, poets, and leaders throughout the centuries. For the most part, however, the life of medieval Jewry was fraught with persecution, limited rights, marginalization, and often pogroms that massacred Jews simply for being Jews. Things began to change with the Enlightenment, the growth of the natural sciences, and movements toward a kind of secular society. The United States was the first Western country to separate church and state, and France followed this in 1789 with its own revolution. For the first time in European history, many intellectuals challenged religious teachings and even the necessity in believing in God. It was the "age of reason," and many Europeans influenced by the Enlightenment began to reject religious

distinctions that separated humans. The ideal of this new orientation was to replace religious categories with universal ones; humans were rational beings.

For the first time in almost two millennia, Jews were allowed to participate as citizens alongside everyone else in modern capitalist nation-states (Map 3.3). This kind of universal tolerance was widely embraced by Jews in Western Europe. One of the leading Enlightenment figures was a gentile, Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781). In his scholarship, he demonstrated the full humanity of Jews and Muslims and argued for their integrated participation in modern society. Lessing's colleague and friend Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) became the leading figure in the Jewish *Haskalah*

Map 3.3 The emancipation of European Jewry, 1789–1918.

or Enlightenment movement, the eventual source of Reform Judaism, and the first "modern" form of Judaism. Mendelssohn and the Haskalah movement believed that Jews could fully participate in the gentile world and still retain their Jewish identity. Reform Jews wanted to be both Jewish and French, or Jewish and German. While the Reform movement began in Germany, notably in Hamburg in 1818, it rapidly spread across Europe and the United States. Of course, this begs the question: How? How can one be both a Jew and a citizen of a secular state?

Reform Judaism, along with other forms of Judaism, had to learn how to relate to the larger secular society. Reform Jews took on a new vision of Jewish identity. Its hallmarks were a universal ethic and demythologizing some of the traditional demands of Jewish life. Is Hebrew really a sacred language and the only one we ought to use for prayer? In the Book of Leviticus, for example, we find a holiness code that forbids such things as wearing a garment made of two different types of fibers (say, a cotton/wool blend), forbidding sowing two different kinds of seeds in the same farm plot, forbidding eating of cleft-footed animals or eating sea creatures that have no fins, and forbidding shaving one's beard (11:7–19:28). Were these restrictions really necessary and, if so, why? The ancient Jew saw them as violations of the natural law, but ought one still to think so? Further, the claim that Moses received all of the Torah on Mount Sinai, including the Oral Torah, seemed anti-intellectual.

In Charleston, South Carolina (1824), and in the West London Synagogue (1842), the Reform Society of Israelites emerged. Perhaps the most important figure in the United States was Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900). Wise immigrated to the United States from Bohemia in 1864 and became the rabbi at Congregation Beth El in Albany, New York. He would later settle in Cincinnati. Wise was one of the principal architects of three Reform institutions: the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

In 1885, Wise set up a conference of Reform rabbis that created the Pittsburgh Platform, which became the foundation for Reform thought. It intended to do away with what they considered mythic ideas in Judaism, such as miracles that violated nature, the bodily resurrection, and even heaven and hell. These were deemed "the primitive ideas of its own age." Rather, Reform Judaism was committed to "progressive religion, ever striving to be in accord with the postulates of reason."[5] Most importantly, the Pittsburgh Platform distinguished between ethical norms in Judaism and ritual components, declaring only the ethical laws as binding.

### *Orthodox Judaism*

Orthodox Judaism is virtually a mirror opposite of Reform Judaism. One might say that it simply retained its premodern practice and identity. This is true to an extent, but it is also a modern movement, one that is an intentional response to the Reform movement. When Rabbi Wise graduated his first class of rabbis in his Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College, he hosted a banquet that included clams, crabs, shrimp, and frog legs—all of which violate traditional kosher laws, as though he was flaunting

## GENDER FOCUS: Women in Judaism

Premodern Judaism shares with the ancient period the assumption that men and women are intrinsically different, and that those differences express themselves in the home, society, and the synagogue. In the Tanakh, daughters and wives were considered something more like property than as people having intrinsic rights. A father could sell his daughter as payment for a debt (Exodus 21:7), and the commandment not to "covet your neighbor's wife" was alongside not coveting anything one's neighbor owned, including "your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21). Modern forms of Judaism have reconsidered the intrinsic dignity of both women and men and have interpreted restrictions on women as outdated. The greatest equality for women has been among the secular forms of Judaism, particularly Jewish socialism and Zionism. Among the religious camps, women have equal status in Reform, less in Conservative, and least in Orthodox Judaism.

Today, in both Reform and Conservative Judaism, women are ordained to the rabbinate. Here, Barbara Aiello, the first female rabbi in Italy, lights Hanukkah candles.

The state of Israel's Declaration of Independence asserts complete equality of men and women in social and political spheres. It was not until the 1970s, however, that women began to be ordained as rabbis. Today, it is common in both Reform and Conservative synagogues in the United States for a young woman to have a *bat mitzvah*, to read the Torah in the synagogue, to cantor during services, and to be the local rabbi. All of this was unthinkable in the premodern period, as it remains the case among the Orthodox.

the new freedom Reform Jews believed they had. Orthodox Jews were outraged and began organizing their own institutions, including the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in 1898, as a counter to Wise's Union of American Hebrew Congregations. It was a challenge that had a history as well. Orthodoxy's first great intellectual defender, Samson Raphael Hirsh (1808–1888), endeavored to show how a Jew can live in a secular state and remain fully Jewish in identity and practice.

It was an effort to embrace the fact of modern secular existence while also retaining traditional Judaism. In the United States, he had a large audience, as many traditional Jews had emigrated to America from Eastern Europe.

In one sense, we could say that the Orthodox movement was more legal than theological. That is, it insisted on a strict following of Torah and its Talmudic interpretations. This was the great contrast between it and the Reform movement. It might even be the case that the Orthodox movement became stricter than premodern Judaism actually was. On the other hand, it was also a movement of contrasting theology. Reform taught that theology develops historically, while Orthodoxy taught that Judaism was based on eternal, unchanging truths. Reform taught that prayer should be in the vernacular (common tongue), while Orthodoxy insisted on Hebrew. Reform taught that the Torah represented ancient developments and the Oral Torah historically evolved, while Orthodoxy taught that it all came from Moses on Sinai. Reform abandoned literal messianic beliefs, while Orthodoxy insisted on them.

### *Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*

One particularly interesting strain of Orthodoxy is the Ultra-Orthodox. We met them in the introductory material of this chapter. One expression of Ultra-Orthodoxy is the Hasidic movement, which marks itself by intentional communities around a *rebbe* and with a decidedly ecstatic spirituality. Another form is the *Haredim,* or "tremblers" before God. Like the Hasidim, they tend to live in their own neighborhoods. Not only do they culturally set themselves apart from non-Jews, they also distinguish themselves from other Jews, whom they typically consider religiously as non-Jews. Some refuse to read newspapers or watch television. Many restrict themselves to rabbi-approved cell phones that block the internet. Fascinatingly, many Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel are among the least Zionistic. That is, because Israel is a secular state and in existence before the time of the messiah, it lacks the necessary religious legitimacy for any robust support.

### *Conservative Judaism*

In the nineteenth century, the great German rabbi and scholar Zecharias Frankel argued for a "positive, historical Judaism," one that embraced the modern world while still decidedly retaining Jewish faithfulness to the tradition. In the United States, Rabbi Solomon Schechter is a grandfather of the movement. He moved from England's Cambridge University in 1902 to become the president of New York City's Jewish Theological Seminary. This is Conservative Judaism's intellectual home.

We can legitimately see the Conservative movement as something of a middle path between Reform and Orthodox. On the one hand, Conservativism calls for strict obedience to the laws of the Torah, particularly in dietary and ritual concerns. Further, most of its prayers are in Hebrew, and traditional Sabbath rules apply. For Conservative Jews, the Torah is binding on all Jews in all times. On the other

hand, Conservative Judaism also believes that the law has always evolved to new circumstances, and that adaptation does not violate the tradition. Further, unlike Orthodox Jews, there is little in Conservativism that has the "ghetto" mentality. For example, Conservative Jews are far more open to modern society and secular education. It has also opened itself to women cantors and rabbis, and some even to the LGBTQ perspective.

The Orthodox movement was based not only on a premodern fidelity to the Torah, but also on medieval theological commitments that it believed the Reform movement jettisoned. Conservative Judaism has retained a great deal of fidelity to following the traditional precepts of the Torah, but has placed far less emphasis on beliefs. Their emphasis is on orthopraxy (right action) rather than on orthodoxy (right belief). As one scholar has pithily framed it, "Think whatever you like, but do what Torah requires."

### *Reconstructionist Judaism*

The Reconstructionist movement was started by Mordecai Kaplan, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1930s. In Kaplan's groundbreaking book *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), he argued for a view of religion that was less about revelations from God and more about being symbolic expressions of a culture. As a product of Enlightenment rationalism, Kaplan thought that many of the beliefs in religions, including his own, were not sustainable for the modern mind. Thus, beliefs about a personal God, miracles, the resurrection of the just, and so on were both unbelievable and unnecessary.

Kaplan was a robust Jewish enthusiast and desired to create a way for modern Jews to engage the riches of their tradition without premodern beliefs. He did not want to reform Judaism or preserve its orthodoxy; he wanted to "reconstruct it" into a modern realizable form. In Reconstructionist Judaism, to be a Jew was certainly to follow the laws and customs of the tradition, but it was essentially a movement that promoted Jewish culture, including dance, food, music, and the arts. Synagogues would certainly be used for prayer, but he also advocated transforming them into Jewish community centers so that they would support the whole of Jewish life.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) was established in 1968 in Philadelphia by followers of Kaplan. One reads on its website, "RRC is dedicated to teaching Judaism as an evolving religious civilization and to engaging with the riches of Jewish tradition to create meaning, connect to the sacred and bring individuals and communities to greater love, justice and peace."[6] Its purpose is to train rabbis who are "deeply rooted in the richness of the Jewish tradition and responsive to the experiences, needs and aspirations of evolving Jewish communities." Kaplan's daughter Judith was the first Jewish girl to celebrate her bat mitzvah in the United States, and in 1984, the RRC became the first seminary to admit gay and lesbian students. In 2018, the movement renamed itself as "Reconstructing Judaism."

## Judaism as a "Race" and Secular Jewish Movements

The age of the Enlightenment created optimism among Jews, who were no longer imagined as mere residents of a Christian country, often at the whims of the ruler. As we saw, prior to secular nation-states, Jews were marginalized in their respective societies. Jews in France or Germany did not think of themselves so much as French *and* Jewish, or as German *and* Jewish, but simply Jews living in a given country. This would also be how gentiles saw them. Now, particularly after the French Revolution, Jews had full citizenship. This did have a price: one had to preference a secular identity to one's religious identity.

The ideals of the Enlightenment were genuine enough, but they often crashed on the rocks of human prejudice. As Jews increasingly were "secularized" in Europe, they entered into the political and economic life of their respective countries. As they achieved success, however, a backlash occurred. Some Europeans began to fear that the Jews were taking over "their" society. Further, by the end of the nineteenth century, a secular, and supposedly scientific, definition had come to replace the religious definition of Jews in European society. Jews were imagined to be members of a distinct "race." This meant that they could be marginalized not for their religious beliefs or practices, but because they were racially different. In the midst of Enlightenment rationalism, all the old Christian stereotypes of Jews returned in a new guise. Being a "race" of Jews then conferred an unchangeable fact; people cannot be otherwise than their own race. Moreover, the advocates of the "scientific" theory of race viewed any attempt at assimilation through intermarriage as a racial problem. In the 1930s, the German Nazi Party would begin to exploit this new kind of prejudice against "the Jewish race," a competitor to the "Aryan race" of the German people.

In the United States, Jews fared better than in Europe. America was forged by the immigration of many peoples, but there were, of course, American prejudices. African Americans were oppressed the most. Catholics and Jews were often suspect and regularly kept out of clubs and associations, denied higher employment opportunities, and so on. Yet America never had the European pogroms and mass expulsions that had plagued Jews throughout European history. The largest wave of Jewish immigrants came in the nineteenth century from Eastern Europe. By the beginning of World War II, approximately one-third of all Jews lived in the United States. After World War II and the loss of 6 million Jews due to the Holocaust, the United States had two-thirds of all Jews in the world.

## The Holocaust

The odd "scientific" claim that Jews represented a race was exploited by the German Nazi Party led by Adolf Hitler. Reeling from the devastation of World War I (1914–1918), Germany did not readily recover, and the reparation obligations of the Versailles Treaty contributed to devastating economic conditions and great resentment among

the German people. Hitler's Nazi Party came to power in 1933 on a program aimed to return the country to glory. Among other propaganda initiatives, Hitler and the Nazis blamed Germany's ails on "the Jews," who were claimed to be a foreign race that polluted the purity of the "Aryan race." Progressively, the Nazis instigated laws that stripped German Jews of their rights as citizens. In 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and in 1939, Germany drew Europe into its worst war in history. Systematic oppression increased when Germany invaded Poland. There, Jews were moved into ghettos that were created to confine them. German occupations included Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Holland, and France, resulting in several million more Jews falling under Nazi control (Map 3.4).

Map 3.4 The Holocaust.

By 1942, large-scale death camps had been created to facilitate the "final solution," and Jews were led away in cattle cars en masse. Many were worked to death and others killed systematically in gas chambers. In the infamous Auschwitz camp in Poland, more than 2 million Jews were exterminated. Along the Russian Front, "action groups" were assigned to slaughter Jews and Gypsies as the troops advanced. **Holocaust**, the term for this horrific tragedy, literally means "burnt offering," in reference both to the way many died and as an allusion to ancient temple sacrifice. The word many Jews use for it is ***Shoah***, Hebrew for holocaust. The ultimate agenda for Hitler was to remove the "race" of Jews from the world. While there are scores of heroic stories of government officials, church representatives, and individuals who strove to save Jews from this fate, what strikes historians is just how cooperative, and even supportive, many occupied countries were in this "final solution." All told, 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and some 5 million to 6 million other "problematic" non-Jews with them.

**Holocaust:** systematic murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators

***Shoah:*** Hebrew word for the Holocaust

Since the end of World War II, many Jews and some Christian theologians have asked hard questions about their assumptions of a loving God who allowed such mass carnage on the innocent. Jewish theology had widely taught that God was providential

The Nazis rounded up European Jews and sent them to the death camps in boxcars. These Jewish prisoners, some of them children, were photographed at the infamous Auschwitz death camp.

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

The Nobel Prize–winning author Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, remembers an event that took place while he was a prisoner there. His tale shows that not even consignment to the death camps of the Holocaust could destroy Jewish faith.

The Jewish festival of the giving of the Torah by God to Moses, *Simhath Torah*, arrived. However, there was no Torah in the camp that Jews could use to ritually carry in celebration. Indeed, during this celebration Hasidic Jews pick up the Torah and literally dance with it to express their joy. So an old man looks around for a substitute to use for the Torah celebration. He sees a young boy and asks him, "Do you remember what you learned in heder (Torah school)?" "Yes I do," replied the boy. "Really," said the man, "you really remember Sh'ma Yisrael" (the confession of faith in the oneness of God). "I remember much more," said the boy. "Sh'ma Yisrael is enough," said the man. And he lifted the boy, clasped him in his arms and began dancing with him—as though *he* were the Torah. And all joined in. They all sang and danced and cried. They wept, but they sang with fervor—never before had Jews celebrated *Simhath Torah* with such fervor.

Source: Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 146.

and that, if people followed his covenant, God would protect them. It was inconceivable to the vast majority that somehow they had failed God so as to deserve the Holocaust. Were God's promises lies? Had God failed them? Was there even a God?

After the Holocaust, some of the most Orthodox Jews treated it as the same kind of tragedies that they had suffered historically, such as the exile and fall of the first temple by the Babylonians as well as the destruction of the second temple by the Romans. In short, they had failed in their covenant obligations and lost God's hand of protection. The vast majority of Jews, both religious and secular, have seen this as ludicrous. The scale of destruction simply had no sense of proportion.

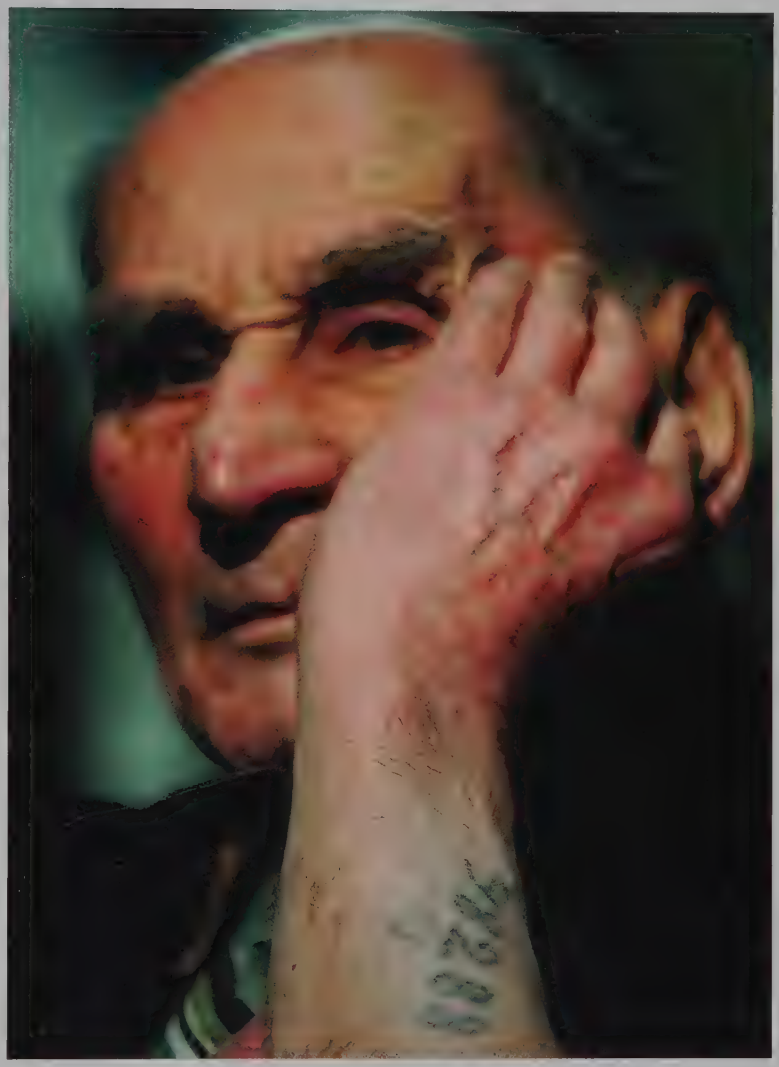
One Jewish thinker, Richard Rubenstein, has argued that it was God who died at Auschwitz, and that the Jewish people would have to go on with their way of life without God. Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel has argued that God must be taken to task for the Holocaust. Wiesel writes:

> Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might he had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end up in the furnaces?[7]

For Wiesel, God must be engaged, but now with a demand for divine accountability.

In contrast to these voices, Jewish Reform rabbi and philosopher Emil Fackenheim argues that such responses actually give Hitler and the Nazis a posthumous victory—that is, the end of Judaism. Fackenheim pressed for an additional command to the traditional 613 commands in the Torah. This 614th command is to remain faithful and Jewish. Fackenheim writes:

> Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. . . . A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work.[8]



Leon Greenman, a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, displays his Auschwitz serial number tattoo after addressing an Anti-Nazi League meeting in Brighton, England.

## Jewish Socialism and Zionism

Most of the Jews in Eastern Europe never did sense that they were being invited to join a new Enlightenment order of equality and inclusion. The challenge was to devise a strategy for surviving in societies that were replacing religious anti-Judaism

with racial anti-Semitism. Among the more fully assimilated and secularized Jews, new responses arose: Jewish Socialism and Zionism.

### *Jewish Socialism*

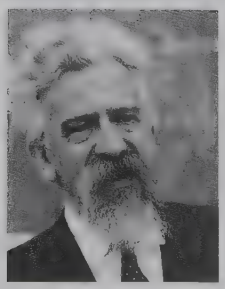
Socialism, as it was advocated by philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1796–1860), argued for a secularized and economic interpretation of history. It promised an eventual transformation of society that was without classes and where suffering and injustice could be overcome.

Jewish socialists did not regard this message as particularly Jewish. For them, it was enough to see Judaism as a unique contributor to the ideals of social justice and an international ethic. Unlike their Reform counterparts, Jewish socialists no longer represented themselves as "religious," because religion belonged to a prescientific age. A pivotal date for Jewish socialism is usually considered 1897, the year of the formation of the Bund, or Jewish Worker's Union, in Poland. Many secular Jews joined the socialist movement and rejected all connections with Judaism. They considered themselves purely secular, nonreligious persons.

### *Zionism*

Zionism was born out of disenchantment with modernity and its Enlightenment promises; it held no hope for a future in which Jews would be accepted as equals in society. Instead, the Zionist view was that the only viable solution for Jews in light of the long history of persecution was to have a state of their own where they could guarantee their liberty.

*Zion* is a complicated biblical word. It refers to Mount Zion, on which King David built the capital of Jerusalem. Zion often simply referred to the capital itself. But it also represented the people of Israel and the Holy Land collectively. *Zionism*, as it was coined in 1893, represents a movement to return from exile to Zion, to the Holy Land. It was a secular movement to organize Jews for the creation of a homeland in Palestine, and it was a controversial agenda among European and American Jews. As noted, some in the Orthodox community regarded it as something of a blasphemy, or at least a provocative conceit, as it could not be authentic if secular. Reform Jews were likewise mixed in their response. Some were highly supportive; others, however, saw themselves as a religious community that had made peace with secular society. Certainly, it was a slow-developing movement among Jews. Zionism did not really come into its own until after the Holocaust, when it seemed clear to Jews everywhere that they could never count on being accepted as equals in Europe, and that the only protection available to them would be in their own homeland, their own state.



Theodor Herzl, founder of the Zionist movement to create a Jewish state.

In 1896, Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) the founder of the Zionist movement, was a young Jewish journalist in France. He was particularly alarmed at what is now known as the "Dreyfus Affair," in which Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French artillery officer, was convicted of treason in 1894. It was obvious that he was innocent

and that the charges were manufactured. At that moment, Herzl became convinced that Jews would never be fully assimilated or free of discrimination. In 1896, he wrote *The Jewish State*, in which he argued against assimilation and proposed the creation of a Jewish homeland. The movement was born. Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, the same year the socialist workers union Bund was being formed in Poland. It was in Basel that the World Zionist Organization was founded.

"Distress binds us together and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength. . . . Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation; the rest we shall manage for ourselves."

—Theodor Herzl on Zionism

Theodore Herzl died in 1904, but he left a thriving and committed political party. In 1911, the World Zionist Organization began a modest but persistent program of colonizing areas of Palestine under British control. By 1917, the British foreign secretary, Lord James Balfour, wrote a letter now known as the Balfour Declaration, pledging Britain's support for a Jewish state. France, Italy, and the United States endorsed the idea.

Like Jewish socialism, Zionism offered to secular Jews a powerful vision. It created a new way for secular Jews to be Jewish, the reappropriation of the Hebrew language, and the creation of a social organization based at the time on farming collectives. Before World War II, Jewish socialism had more adherents than Zionism, but it was utterly eclipsed by Zionism after the war, particularly as it was obvious in states like Russia that socialism (or communism) could still be a social order that marginalized and persecuted Jews. After World War II, the urgency of the Zionist message seemed obvious to the overwhelming majority of Jews, both religious and secular. If they were to survive, Jews must have their own national homeland.

Some Sabras, secular Jews who led the Zionist movement to create an Israeli state, stand guard over their fields on a kibbutz in Israel during the early days of the new nation.

In 1948, the United Nations declared the State of Israel, and in 1949, Israel joined the United Nations organization. The issue is really quite complex. Britain had asked the General Assembly to establish the Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). The report of this committee led to the resolution to divide Palestine into two states—one Jewish and the other Arab (Map 3.5). The Arab states, however, refused to accept the UN partition plan, and on May 15, 1948, the armies of seven Arab states invaded the newly formed nation and the war for independence began. The Israelis defeated the Arab forces, and an armistice with the Egyptians was made in 1949. Relations with neighboring Arab states remained tense throughout the decades that followed, flaring again into the wars of 1967 and 1973.

The 1967 conflict was decisive in many ways. In June of that year, the state of Israel was threatened by four predominantly Muslim nations: Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Israeli forces were overwhelmingly outnumbered. Under the leadership of General Yitzhak Rabin, Israel routed the combined Arab forces in a war that was over in six days.

Map 3.5 The creation of the State of Israel

The signing of the Camp David Peace Accord on March 26, 1979. U.S. President Jimmy Carter (center) is flanked by President Anwar Sadat of Egypt on his right and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin on his left.

At the end of the war, Israel occupied territory formerly under the control of the Egyptians and Syrians, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. In taking East Jerusalem, Israelis recovered one of their holiest places, the Temple Mount. This was also the third holiest place in Islam, where the area of the former temple destroyed in 70 CE had been replaced by a Muslim mosque, the Dome of the Rock. It was here that Muhammad was said to have ascended into heaven to the Divine Throne. In 1973, the Egyptian army pushed into the Israeli-occupied territory of the Sinai Peninsula, and the Syrian army invaded the Golan Heights. This was a surprise attack on Yom Kippur, one of Judaism's holiest days.

The Israelis successfully responded with U.S. support, and from a military point of view, little had changed. But the war changed Israeli politics. The leadership of the Labor Party was undermined, and this led to the rise of the conservative Likud Party, with the election of Menachem Begin as prime minister in 1977. Religious Zionists, like the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), were committed that none of the occupied territories captured in the 1967 war would be given back. The Gush Emunim and others began an intensive program of establishing Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. When Menachem Begin came to power, he supported this effort. From this time on, religious Zionism has played an important role in Israeli public policy. One might think that taking over the conquered land simply represents the "spoils of war," particularly since Arab states started both wars. But it is a violation of international law to retain the land of another country, even if lost in war. UN Resolution 242 called for the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the 1967 conflict.

Early on in the development of these settlements, Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat signed a peace treaty in 1979. This treaty called for Israel to

Youths celebrate the founding of the modern state of Israel at the Western Wall, waving an Israeli flag.

return occupied territory in the Sinai. In many ways, the treaty was successful. Egypt regained the Sinai, and both countries agreed to formal diplomatic relations. However, it also provoked militant fundamentalists to engage in terrorist tactics against their Palestinian counterparts. Jewish settlements in occupied territories have continued rather unabated to this day, and Palestinians experience this as not only ongoing occupation but also literally robbing them of their land. Israel has also suffered from Palestinian terrorism and regular threats by its neighbors. One of the great concerns among Palestinians is that the new state of Palestine would fundamentally consist of isolated conclaves. Another concern is access to Jerusalem, particularly the Temple Mount.

A further complication to peace talks is the construction of the West Bank barrier (or wall) that began in 2000. Upon completion, it is intended to span 440 miles. This massive security wall reaches up to 25 feet in many areas, and is aimed at reducing Palestinian terrorist attacks. Palestinians living in these areas have found their villages or farms split, even cutting off some from their own property. The UN General Assembly issued a resolution that states the wall violates international law and should be removed. The vote was 144-4, with 12 abstentions.

In some sense, the prospects of peace in the Holy Land seem dim. Settlements continue and, as of this writing, neither Israeli leadership nor Palestinian leadership have enough common ground for a lasting peace. On the other hand, more than 150 organizations for peace and/or joint Arab-Jewish initiatives have emerged. This includes the International Center for Conciliation and Ossim Shalom (Social Workers for Peace and Social Welfare). Thus, there are many measures on the ground that strive to address the mutual conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter with an ancient question: What does it mean to be Jewish? Rabbi Hillel appears to have won the challenge of the gentile who would convert if the faith could be consolidated while he stood on one foot. Hillel focused on compassion: This was the key and essence, even as he also commanded the young man to "go and learn." Perhaps, however, Rabbi Shammai actually wins in the long run. His answer seems to be that the issue is just too complicated to answer. Certainly, Jews today debate among themselves about their identity as they move into the future. The fundamentalist movement of the Ultra-Orthodox reject much of the secular realities or perspectives of modern and postmodern culture. For them, Judaism is about not accommodating the world. Other forms of modern Judaism and postmodern/post-Holocaust forms, by

contrast, consider the holy and secular less as competitors and more as complementary conditions. They tend to look at historical change as a necessary medium through which God reveals himself. They also appear far more tolerant of diverse ways of interpreting Judaism in the world. To the Ultra-Orthodox, however, diversity betrays lack of authentic faithfulness.

The strength of modern/postmodern forms of Judaism is their ability to adapt Jewish life to new insights about the human condition, such as issues of sexual orientation and gender equality. The strength of the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox might be that history and ethnicity are simply not adequate substitutes for tradition. Recall how the patriarch Jacob got his new name "Israel" from God: He wrestled with God. Genesis 32:28 actually is richer than this: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." While Judaism is a very small religion in terms of the human population (recall just 0.2 percent), it has an oversized influence. Much of this may have to do with its ability to wrestle with ultimate things.

## Discussion Questions

1. Judaism is presented as a form of the "myth" or story of history. How does Israel's story justify that perspective? Give examples from both the biblical and postbiblical periods.
2. When did the foundations of Rabbinic Judaism emerge and why? Give examples of important developments.
3. What is the Talmud, and what is its significance for the religion of Judaism?
4. How does the history of anti-Judaism in Western civilization relate to the Holocaust?
5. Compare and contrast Enlightenment Judaism (Haskalah) and Hasidic Judaism.
6. Whom would you nominate as the three most important postbiblical figures in the history of Judaism and why?
7. What is the impact of the Holocaust on the shape of modern and postmodern forms of Jewish life, religious and secular?
8. Is Zionism a secular form of Judaism, a religious form, or both? Explain your answer with historical examples.

## Key Terms

**Ashkenazi**
**conversos**
**diaspora**
**gentile**
**Hasidism**
**Hellenization**
**Holocaust**
**judge**
**Kabbalah**

*(continued)*

## Key Terms (continued)

mitzvot
Rabbinic Judaism
Second Temple Period
Sephardic
Septuagint
Shoah
synagogue
Talmud
Tanakh
Torah
yarmulke
Zionism
Zohar

## Suggested Readings

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## Additional Resources

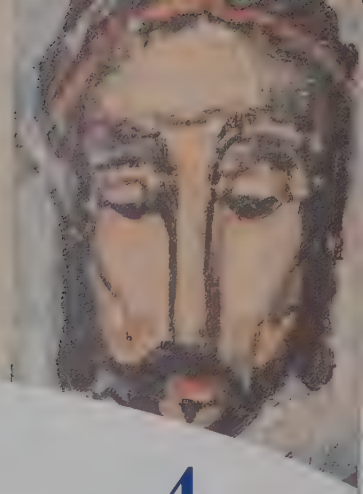
*The Story of the Jews with Simon Schama* (2013, television series). Available online, this five-part series traces 3,000 years of Jewish history from biblical origins to post-Holocaust Judaism and the state of Israel.

*The Chosen* (1981, feature film). Set in 1940s Brooklyn and based on Chaim Potok's novel (published in 1967 by Simon & Schuster), this film presents the story of two young men, one from an Ultra-Orthodox Hasidic family and the other from a more "modern" Orthodox family, at the time of the Zionist struggle of Israel for statehood. A dramatic examination of the conflict between different ways of Jewish life and thought responding to the "modern" world at a critical moment in Jewish history. Color, 107 minutes, dir. Jeremy Kagan.

*Genocide* (1981, documentary). Academy Award–winning documentary on the Holocaust narrated by Elizabeth Taylor and Orson Welles. An Arnold Schwartzman production available from the Simon Wiesenthal Center (http://bit.ly/2i8SweK).

## Notes

1. I first reflected on this story and ways of considering being Jewish in Peter Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith: Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), pp. 71–76.
2. Cited in Arthur Green, ed. *Jewish Spirituality,* Vol. I (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 194.
3. See Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* (New York: Image, 1982), p. 216.
4. Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man,* 2nd ed., edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (Amherst: Humanity Press, 1958), p. 45.
5. From the 6th principle in the Pittsburgh Platform. Central Conference of American Rabbis (ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/ CCAR ed. 2014).
6. https://www.rrc.edu/.
7. Elie Wiesel, *Night,* translated by Marion Wiesel (New York: Penguin Books), p. 67.
8. Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History* (Northvale, NJ, and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 84.



# 4 THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

## Overview

Originating in the Congo, the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth by his Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu has 17 million members. Their spirituality is a combination of Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and traditional African religious beliefs. Their service is one of faith healings, speaking in tongues, and high emotions. Just outside of Snowmass, Colorado, a group of Cistercian monks rise at 3:00 a.m. to meditate on scripture. This is one of six daily gatherings for prayer and meditation. The atmosphere is intentionally quiet and highly contemplative. Elsewhere in a shantytown outside of Lima, Peru, a small group, or *base community*, gathers to reflect on the Gospel of Luke and Jesus's message of liberation of the poor. In Moscow, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church leads the Eucharist at the Cathedral of the Twelve Apostles. It is an hours-long, formal service that includes several processions, many chants, lengthy prayers, and the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Finally, at the same time, Christians in India include gestures and offerings in their worship that highly resemble those of their Hindu neighbors.

These are all enormously different ways of being religious, yet all these believers are Christians engaged in prayer and worship that they believe Christ wants of them. Our challenge is to understand the dazzling diversity among Christians as

◀ An artist's rendition of the image on the Holy Shroud or burial cloth, which popular piety understands to be the image of Jesus.

Photo of the actual face on the Holy shroud, believed by some to be the face of Jesus. Kept in the Cathedral in Turin, carbon dating of the cloth itself suggests the fourteenth or fifteenth century. What defies scientific explanation is how the physiologically correct image got on the cloth, and how it has survived without deteriorating.

well as their unity of faith, especially in the contemporary world. We are equally invited to discover how they came to express their faith in the way they do. This chapter thus provides an overview of the history of Christianity, its developments in theology, and its various roles in the cultures where it finds itself.[1]

## The Beliefs of Christians

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are typically referred to as "Abrahamic" religions; that is, they ground their historical faith on the God of Abraham, often identified as the "father of faith." The God of Abraham is the creator of all and has designated human history according to a plan for final salvation. Further, all three religions understand that God is the foundation for morality and truth. Thus, to believe the truths revealed by God, and to act in harmony with God's will, is the goal of this life. But Christians are unique in that they believe this same God has

revealed himself as a Trinity. While God is one, and Christians believe they are monotheists, this same singular God is also a dynamic relation of *persons*: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians also believe that the Son united with humanity in the person of Jesus. Christians consider Jesus the icon of God, the presence of God on earth, and the Word of God. Further, they believe that the Son, Jesus Christ, suffered and died on the cross as a sacrificial atonement for sin. He rose on the third day, and after forty days of periodically appearing to his disciples as the risen Lord, he ascended to heaven. Finally, they believe that, at the end of time, Christ will return to judge the living and the dead at the final resurrection. Obviously, this is a substantial departure from the kind of **monotheism** that Judaism and Islam hold.

**monotheism:** the belief there is only one God

Like Jews and Muslims, Christians understand that the gravest problem in the human condition is sin—the failure to live according to God's moral truths. Like the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, sin is often understood as injustice and idolatry. God challenges persons and their society to attend to the needs of those around them and to work for justice and the common good. Systematic poverty in the context of wealth is fundamentally evil and must be checked. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets also challenged idolatry—that is, worshipping other gods rather than the only God. Later, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, idolatry also represented any disordered desires that put interest or devotion to anything above God. Wealth or power can be an idol. The tradition devised the list of *seven deadly sins*: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

What distinguishes Christians from Jews and Muslims is not the fact of sin or its violence against God's will, but rather the origins of sin and the necessary remedy. For Christians, the sin of Adam and Eve in disobeying God in the Garden of Eden was decisive. It created a snowball effect whereby the very nature of an unreformed soul has a quality of revolt against God. In the West, Christians often call this **original sin**. Of course, Christians also believe that all humans are made in the image and likeness of God, as we saw in Judaism. But due to original sin, we are stuck. We simply do not have the freedom to keep from sinning.

**original sin:** sin of Adam and Eve carried out through the human condition as a corruption of the soul

God's response to this human dilemma was to send his Son to redeem humans by dying in reparation for sin and to restore human nature to its original innocence by his **grace**. Jesus, the Son of God, represents more than acting as an atonement sacrifice. In his incarnation, he also provides the means for the same kind of life with God—that is, living the divine life by his grace. Further, in conquering death, he leads his followers into eternal life.

**grace:** unmerited gift of God

Jesus's principal message in his preaching was that the **kingdom of God** was at hand. It is a kingdom believers can begin to live right now. God's kingdom is one of universal love, justice, and harmony. It is not as if Jesus came with an exact manifesto on how to arrange religion, politics, social order, and so on. Rather, he preached that the kingdom, which had begun with him, would come to full fruition. In its ultimate expression, human flourishing on every level would have the day.

**kingdom of God:** Jesus's expression of God's rule expressed by love, justice, peace, and harmony

The kingdom of God can never be conflated with an earthly kingdom or political order, and Christians surely struggle with the same moral and spiritual challenges that afflict the human condition. Still, what Christians believe, how they act, and how they are organized ought to be infused by the kingdom's values. The goal of actively living out the kingdom has challenged Christians to understand the relationship between the church and the world, civic life and ecclesial life, and even how their faith relates to the non-Christian world. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and later Protestant expressions of Christianity have all endeavored to shape religious life in the context of faithfulness to Christ's kingdom.

Today, Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with 2.2 billion Christians. Of these, about 1.1 billion are Roman Catholics, 800 million Protestants and Evangelicals, and 260 million Eastern Orthodox. And as we will see, it has both influenced and been influenced by the developing cultures around the world, particularly in the West. The great challenge of this chapter is to understand Christianity in its diversity as well as to see what roles Christianity has played in the development of modern society.

## Christianity Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 31 CE | Crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth |
| 48–60 | Letters of St. Paul |
| 70 | Fall of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem |
| 70–100 | Gospels written |
| 313 | Edict of Milan permitting Christianity in the Roman Empire |
| 325 | Council of Nicaea declares the divine nature of Jesus equal to God the Father |
| 380 | Christianity declared the official religion of the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius |
| 451 | Council of Chalcedon declares both divine and human natures in the one person of Christ |
| 732 | Muslim invasion of Europe stopped at Tours by Charles Martel |
| 800 | Coronation of Charlemagne |
| 1054 | Schism between Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic Christianity |
| 1095 | First Crusade against Muslims and mass violence against Jews |
| 1198–1216 | Pontificate of Innocent III, most powerful pope in history |
| 1224–1274 | Thomas Aquinas, greatest medieval theologian and philosopher |
| 1453 | Fall of Constantinople to the Muslim Ottoman Turks ends Roman Empire in the East |

We began the chapter with instances of very different expressions of Christianity, and many additional examples could have been used to demonstrate that Christianity is no monolithic structure. As with many religions in the modern world, this pluralism presents a challenge. Some Christians who identify as **fundamentalists** challenge this diversity and blame the modern secular world with challenging the purity of the faith. We noted this dynamic in Chapter 1. Fundamentalism is suspicious of a secular view of the world and culture as watering down religious purity. It is also suspicious of scientific claims when these challenge long-held biblical beliefs, and it tends to see the world outside its own enclave as intrinsically disordered and corrupting. Also as noted in Chapter 1, there are a variety of relationships religion and science might have, from *conflict* to *independence* to *dialogue* to *integration*. **Modernists** are much more open to incorporating scientific insights into their understanding of how best to engage the Gospel in the most relevant and faithful way. Both Protestantism and Catholicism responded to the advent of the modern world differently. But they simply could not avoid initially seeing it as a threat, as it often butted heads with long-held religious perspectives.

**fundamentalists:** as used here, the most conservative wing of Evangelical Protestants, who believe modern science or secular perspectives threaten Gospel truths

**modernists:** as used here, the liberal wing of Protestantism, who embraced modern science and cultural progress

| | |
|---|---|
| **1517** | Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses posted in Wittenberg, beginning of Protestant Reformation |
| **1545–1563** | Council of Trent |
| **1555** | Peace of Augsburg, first attempt to end religious wars of the Reformation |
| **1648** | Peace of Westphalia, end of religious wars, quest for religious tolerance |
| **1703–1791** | John Wesley, founder of Methodism |
| **1791** | First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing religious freedom |
| **1851** | Karl Marx publishes *Communist Manifesto* |
| **1859** | Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species* |
| **1869–1870** | First Vatican Council |
| **1910–1915** | Publication of *The Fundamentals* begins the fundamentalist/modernist controversy |
| **1939–1945** | World War II and the Holocaust |
| **1950s–1960s** | Emergence of civil rights and feminist movements |
| **1962–1965** | Second Vatican Council |
| **1970s–1980s** | Resurgence of Evangelical fundamentalism |

## Encounter with Modernity: The Fundamentalist–Modernist Controversy (1859–Present)

In the sixteenth century, Copernicus argued persuasively that the earth was not the center of the solar system. This challenged any strict reading of the Bible, which imagined the planets and stars revolving around the earth. Galileo, with an improved telescope and even greater mathematical genius, offered even more evidence. Both had supporters among the Catholic intelligentsia and even the popes of the day. Copernicus dedicated his findings to Pope Paul III; Pope Urban VIII was one of Galileo's benefactors. What got Galileo charged with heresy was not his theory, but his insistence that he had proven the case. (He had also publicly insulted the pope as a fool, which did not help.) Nonetheless, this early and dramatic expression of the scientific method was the beginning of what would become a tension between modernity and traditionally understood Christianity.

In 1650, Anglican Archbishop James Ussher analyzed the genealogies of the Old Testament. He concluded that the biblical account testified that the earth was created in 4004 BCE. A century and a half later, Georges Cuvier mapped out the strata of the Paris river basin and saw a long geological history, including evidence of extinct creatures. These findings seemed to prove that the earth was far older. Some Enlightenment-era clergy assumed that the creation stories spoke figuratively about God's plan of creation. For them, the geologic discoveries reflected God's ongoing creative providence. They argued God had provided replacement species when others died out.

Such an explanation about the divine origin of species became much more difficult to sustain with the work of Charles Darwin (1809–1882). In 1837, Darwin researched the natural phenomena of the Pacific Islands of the Galapagos and discovered not relics of Eden or new species created by God to replace others. Rather, the data only made sense if they were correlated to his theory that species developed by adapting to life's conditions. Instead of a benevolently provident God acting, he saw a cruel battle for survival through natural selection. What was particularly alarming for Christianity was that humanity was no longer framed as uniquely created by God, but was also part of the evolutionary chain.

Again, some church leaders accepted the science and interpreted evolution as part of God's providence. Others, however, were far more alarmed. From the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, debate raged among Protestant denominations over whether to accept or reject evolution. Baptist and Presbyterian churches split over the issue. Given advances in archeology and the sequencing of the human genome, scientists broadly contend that there were various humanoid species on the planet and that *Homo sapiens* even interbred with Neanderthals. What is at stake here is now not only whether the biblical witness can be trusted in such matters, but whether humans are intrinsically distinct from all other mammals.

Not all of the challenges to traditional Christian faith came from scientists. One of the most decisive challenges came in the development of biblical studies. As far back as the Renaissance, Christian intellectuals developed critical literary skills to gain insight into the meaning of ancient texts. During the modern period, these methods were greatly enhanced. When applied to the Bible, and in conjunction with archeological developments in the Holy Land, many scholars began to doubt the historical reliability of the Old Testament. And not only was the veracity of the Old Testament challenged, but that of the New Testament as well. David Levi Strauss (1808–1874) challenged this historicity of the Gospel narratives and argued that the texts were more like hero-myth stories. For Strauss, Jesus's reported miracles were theological symbols rather than facts. Other church historians of note, such as Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), became important voices in the movement.

## Protestant and Catholic Responses

One response to the modern challenges of Christian faith is to embrace them and adjust. While many Protestant denominations, such as the largest Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican, are sometimes understood as "mainstream" Protestants, they also house what has been labeled **liberal Protestantism,** or progressive Protestantism. Scientific analysis of the Bible, for example, has been integral to their ministers' seminary training, and issues about evolution or the difficulty of finding the "historical Jesus" are not threatening.

**liberal Protestantism:** form of Protestant theology that is open to fundamental changes due to dialogue with the modern world

Other Protestants were alarmed and reacted decisively. We have been using the term *fundamentalism* to describe religious reactions against modernity. The reason this term is used has to do with the publication of Protestantism's negative response. *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* was a set of ninety essays published between 1910 and 1915 by the Testimony Company of Chicago. Originally twelve volumes, it became sold as a four-volume set. According to the foreword of the first volume, the publication intended to be a "new statement of the fundamentals of Christianity." But its intent was not exactly this; rather, it intended to argue persuasively against innovations in liberal Protestantism, particularly against modern biblical analysis. In the end, the volumes attacked modern biblical theory, liberal theology, modernism, evolution, and even Roman Catholicism. The project was financed by Lyman Stewart, founder of Union Oil, and his brother Milton. The publisher mailed *The Fundamentals* free of charge to ministers, missionaries, theology professors, and even Sunday school teachers. All told, 250,000 four-volume sets were disseminated throughout the United States and other English-speaking countries.

Roman Catholicism also reacted against the modernist crisis. Rome was already reeling from the French and Italian revolutions, as well as the rise of atheism in European intellectual circles. Add to this the modern scientific study of the Bible, and it seemed too much. In 1864, Pope Pius IX issued the encyclical *Quanta Cura* (*Condemning Errors*) that reacted against the modern ideas such as liberty of conscience,

freedom of speech and religion, secular democracy, and secular socialism. He also attached to it a *Syllabus of Errors* to be formally repudiated by every Catholic. It was the first in a series of papal actions condemning "modernism." In 1907, the Vatican's Holy Office published *Lamentabili Sane* (*Condemning the Errors of the Modernists*), which declared that modernism had become an internal threat. That same year, Pope Pius X published the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (*Feeding the Lord's Flock*) also condemning modernism. By 1910, all Catholic clergy and seminary professors had to take an oath against modernism, an oath that the Church continued to demand until 1967.

Today, Protestant and Evangelical forms of Christianity continue to wrestle with issues of biblical inerrancy, which assertions in the Bible reflect ancient culture and need not be embraced and which ought to be considered universal and timeless, how to deal with the consensus of scholars in the sciences (including social sciences) on issues of gender, sexuality, human nature, and so on. Most mainstream Protestant churches have been highly open to these scientific insights and have tried to interpret authentic Christianity in light of them. This includes embracing women clergy as well as openness to LGBTQ concerns. Most, for example, marry same-sex partners, and many allow clergy to be in same-sex unions. Other Protestants and Evangelicals, however, are adamant that such innovations undermine the very faith they ought to proclaim. Of course, the issue is not an *all-or-nothing* proposition, and many Protestant Christians would not identify as either *liberal* or *fundamentalist*.

Pope John XXIII, who opened the doors of the Roman Catholic Church to modernity by calling the Second Vatican Council.

Roman Catholicism has moved from the intellectual shadow of the antimodernist demands and opened itself up to scientific claims as well as much of the Enlightenment perspective. It did this in particular with the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In contrast to the claims of the *Syllabus of Errors*, the Second Vatican Council celebrated religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and the possibilities of non-Christians being saved. It also charged the Church to be in dialogue with the modern world, both guiding it and learning from it. This does not mean, however, that the Church always agrees with modern social scientific claims, and its understanding of sexuality resembles a form of natural law theory that corresponds more to the medieval period than the modern world.

# Premodern Christianity: The Formative Era (31–313)

## The New Testament

Exactly who Jesus was and what he taught is complicated. Today, we have parts or complete wholes of gospel texts written in the second and third centuries as well as letters and apocalypses written in the names of apostles. The vast majority of these texts were criticized by church fathers, however, and represented expressions of Christianity that eventually were not acceptable. While we might say that the "winners write the history," there are good reasons these texts were not accepted. Most of them represent a *gnostic* theology. *Gnosis* is Greek for knowing, and Christian **Gnosticism** was a movement in the second and third centuries that interpreted the essence of the spiritual life as knowing the secrets of the "real" Jesus, someone who only appeared to be human but in fact was a spiritual being sent by God to share the secrets of heaven. Gnostic texts are difficult to imagine representing the ministry of Jesus as it actually happened. They amount a combination of fantastic cosmologies, Greek mystery religion, and supposed sayings of Jesus.

**Gnosticism:** form of Christianity that denied Jesus was an actual human and that understood salvation as gaining secret knowledge of the divine world

Not until the late fourth century was the **canon** of the New Testament made decisive among Christians, but the church widely embraced most of what is now the canon in around the mid to latter second century. Scholarly consensus is that all of the writings retained in the canon are from the first century.

**canon:** officially approved texts of the Old and New Testaments

## Proclamation from the Synod of Carthage, 397 CE

It was also determined that besides the Canonical Scriptures nothing be read in the Church under the title of divine scriptures. The Canonical Scriptures are these: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings [1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings], Ezra, Nehemiah, two books of Paraleipomena [1–2 Chronicles], Job, the Psalter, five books of Solomon [Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach], the books of the twelve prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Esther, two books of Esdras, two books of the Maccabees. Of the new Testament: four books of the Gospels, one book of the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul, one epistle of the same to the Hebrews, two Epistles of the Apostle Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, one book of the apocalypse of John. Let this be made known to our brother and fellow-priest Boniface, or to other bishops of those parts for the purpose of confirming that Canon. Because we have received from our fathers that those books must be read in the Church. Let it also be allowed that the Passions of the Martyrs be read when their festivals are kept.[2]

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Valentinus and his Gnostic Cosmology

Perhaps the most famous gnostic Christian was Valentinus, who was classically trained in Alexandria, Egypt, and came to Rome in around 140 CE as a professional teacher. He was a member of the regular Christian congregation for a while, but eventually became a disruption to the church at large. His cosmology, or understanding of the nature of the universe, was complex and bizarre to modern ears. Yet he had quite a following.

In brief, this is what he taught: The Absolute God has a companion called *thought* and fourteen pairs of male–female beings called *aeons* (eternities), which emanated out of God. They represent the spiritual cosmos called the *pleroma* (fullness). A disruption in the *pleroma* led to the escape of a spiritual substance called *pneuma* (spirit). The *pneuma* was stabilized by being encased in physical bodies. The Jewish God Yahweh is not the Absolute God, but rather the creator of the material universe. Yahweh made matter to trap the escaped *pneuma*. The heavenly Christ, one of the *aeons*, sent another being, Jesus, to save the spirits trapped in bodies by teaching them their true nature. Realizing their true spiritual nature allowed their *pneuma* to return to the *pleroma* and thus be saved.

Valentinus believed that there were three types of persons. Some were simply physical human beings for whom there is no salvation. Others, presumably ordinary Christians, had a kind of spirit, but not a full spirit. These people would enjoy a modest version of heaven. Finally, there were complete spirits who would return to their greatness in the *pleroma*. These were the Gnostics.

### The Ministry of Jesus

The following is a brief synopsis of the life and ministry of Jesus as it is known in the canonical Gospels. Jesus was raised in Nazareth, a small town in the territory of Galilee in northern Palestine (Map 4.1). Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, ruled Galilee on behalf of Rome. Around 30 CE, a prophet named John, known as the "Baptizer," was preaching repentance and preparation for a coming new age and baptizing Jews as a sign of renewal and anticipation. Whether John expected a new Davidic king (messiah) or had a more radical apocalyptic vision is unclear.

Jesus presented himself for baptism and then went into the wilderness for forty days of intense prayer. Shortly thereafter, he began his own public ministry. Like John, he announced that a new era was upon the world, which he called the "kingdom of God." He became an itinerant preacher, going from town to town in Galilee. Before long, he attracted many disciples, and among them chose twelve with whom he was particularly close and whom he instructed at greater depth. These twelve are called **apostles**, which means "those sent out."

**apostles:** refers to Jesus's closest disciples; literally "to send out"

Jesus was a miracle worker, particularly a healer, and he associated his healing with the nature of the kingdom of God. Typically, he required faith in those he healed. He was also an exorcist and cast out many demons. While the ancient world did not clearly distinguish physical or mental illness from demon possession, some of these

Map 4.1 Palestine at the time of Jesus.

Illustration of Jesus healing a leper from a biblical manuscript found at Mount Athos Monastery in Greece.

actions clearly were seen as directly counteracting supernatural evil. Because of his teaching and healing, he was widely popular in Galilee. On at least one occasion, he sent out his disciples to various towns he intended to visit. They, too, experienced spiritual authority over evil and even received healing powers as Jesus's emissaries.

One of the hallmarks of Jesus's ministry was his breaking several taboos. He touched lepers, had women followers, and consorted with some of the more controversial persons in society. He went to banquets offered by tax collectors and allowed disreputable women to touch him, even washing and anointing his feet on one occasion. To many religious officials, he seemed scandalous, even as the common people celebrated him. Jesus regularly flaunted the Pharisees' understanding of the Oral Torah. He seemed comfortable contradicting excessive interpretations of the Torah regarding such things as scrupulous washing or activity on the Sabbath. On the other hand, he demanded a great deal of inner purification for his followers to embrace the kingdom of God, as well as a wholehearted devotion to those in greatest need. Because of Jesus's demands, and given that he seemed dismissive of strict interpretations of the Law, he made many enemies among religious and political leaders, including highly regarded Pharisees and members of Herod's court. Jesus exacerbated this tension by lambasting religious authorities in many of his sermons.

Interpretations of Jesus and his ministry were varied. Some imagined him a prophet of the last days, others a potential messiah or king who would rid them of Roman occupation, and still others a figure from heaven. Many people of his hometown were baffled, given that he had been a common laborer throughout his young adulthood. Jesus himself contributed to the confusion through his preaching about the kingdom of God. Although he preached using common images and metaphors that would have been appropriate for his peasant listeners, figuring out just what the "kingdom" meant was difficult. At times, the kingdom seemed apocalyptic. At other times, Jesus seemed to be advancing a movement of inner holiness that had little to do with the current society. And at still other times, he seemed to be challenging the status quo and the

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Jesus's Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:1–48)

religious and cultural conventions of the powerful in ways that appeared revolutionary. Some people called him **Son of David**, a clear messianic reference. Some saw his choice of twelve apostles as symbolic of the twelve judges of the twelve tribes of Israel, harkening back to the time before the monarchy when judges ruled with God as their king. These images do not cohere well. Was the kingdom of God a pre-monarchy arrangement, the renewed Davidic monarchy that Jeremiah and Isaiah predicted, or an apocalyptic new world? It could not be all of these at once. A further challenge in understanding the kingdom of God is that at times Jesus proclaimed it to be something already upon the people, at other times something just about to come, and at still others something in the unknown future, a time he said that even he did not know.

**Son of David:** designation of Jesus as messiah, or anointed king in the line of David

Jesus not only announced the emerging kingdom, he advanced himself as the central player of that kingdom. He spoke with God's authority in striking, confusing, and even scandalous ways. He forgave sins. He proclaimed himself higher than the Law. He referred to God as his *abba* (dad). He preached that he was the mediator of this kingdom. And he also regularly referred to himself as the **Son of Man**, which probably signals an apocalyptic heavenly figure. His personal claim to authority seemed unbounded. Many followers, particularly the twelve, saw in him divine authority and even the activity of the divine. They were convinced he was the messiah, even as he could not be a traditional messiah.

**Son of Man:** a self-reference of Jesus that involves being an apocalyptic figure prophesied by Daniel

During the Passover week, Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem. His fame had already preceded him, and the people rejoiced by placing their cloaks and palm branches before him. They proclaimed him "son of David"—that is, the messiah, a title Jesus did not resist. During this Passover week, Jesus regularly preached and healed in the Temple, which continued to disturb the Temple officials.

The great Passover supper, or Seder, was Thursday, and Jesus gathered his closest disciples for the Seder meal. During this supper, he proclaimed a new covenant, perhaps as a fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He took unleavened bread and identified his own body with it. He broke it and had his disciples eat it.

Likewise, he took the cup, possibly the final toast of the Seder, which looked forward to the messianic era, and identified his blood with it. The disciples drank from this shared cup. In doing these things, he was anticipating his death, both as a sacrificial atonement and as the sacrifice that would ratify the covenant. Eating and drinking this bread and wine—his body and blood—implicated his disciples; they were entering the new covenant.

One of the twelve, Judas Iscariot, had agreed to hand Jesus over to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court that convened at the Temple, and left the meal early to alert the authorities. After supper, Jesus and a few of his closest disciples went to the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem, to pray. Judas led the Temple guards there, and they arrested Jesus, who was tried that night by the Sanhedrin and convicted of blasphemy. The next morning, he was led to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for another trial. Hoping that Pilate would execute him, the Sanhedrin advanced a different charge: Jesus was a revolutionary, a seditionist. Pilate flogged Jesus and, at the insistence of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, condemned him to death by crucifixion. Jesus died that Friday afternoon.

Throughout history, the Crucifixion has captured the imagination of great artists such as Matthias Grunewald, creator of this sixteenth-century altar piece now in Isenheim, Germany.

Because Jews could not work on the Sabbath, which ran from Friday night until dusk Saturday evening, an obscure disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, quickly buried Jesus in a nearby tomb. Sunday morning after the Sabbath, women disciples came to the tomb in order to anoint his body for a proper burial, but the tomb was empty. That Sunday and for many days after, the resurrected Jesus periodically appeared to the disciples. The Gospels tell that he was both the same Jesus and different, sometimes not being immediately recognized, and with the ability to appear and vanish quickly. They were certain that he was not a mere ghost, but rather the resurrected and glorified messiah they had followed. These disciples became immediately transformed from fearful and rather clueless believers to bold proclaimers that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ (messiah) who had been raised from the dead and was now the savior of the world.

## Early Disciples of the Faith

The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament tells the story of the early disciples' ministry to spread the news that Jesus Christ was Lord and Savior. It begins with the apostles in Jerusalem. Recognizing the symbolic nature of the "twelve," they chose Matthias to replace Judas, who had betrayed Jesus and then killed himself. Soon, they experienced a rush of the Holy Spirit that filled them with power. The apostle Peter then preached to the crowd who had seen some of the commotion. After this first speech, many came to believe in Jesus:

> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need (Acts 2:41–45).

Centered in Jerusalem, the apostles and other believers continued the ministry of Jesus and are described in many of the same ways as Jesus himself. Stephen, the first martyr, forgives his persecutors by uttering virtually the same words that Jesus said on the cross. Peter heals by command. Everything is done in the name of Jesus. Before long, many of the apostles and other Christian leaders spread out to preach the Gospel. According to Acts, Philip went to Samaria, and Peter traveled throughout Judea and western Galilee. Fourth-century church historian Eusebius says that Thomas and John went to Persia, Andrew preached in Scythia (central Eurasia), and Peter later went to Asia Minor (Turkey) and then to Rome. Historically, we know that Alexandria had an early church. Christian communities in Damascus and Antioch also quickly emerged. Reliable information about the exact spread of the faith is sketchy, but it certainly spread in large cultural and trade centers.

Because all the early disciples were Jewish and, indeed, saw Jesus as the Jewish messiah, early missionary energy was devoted to converting Jews to what Acts calls "the Way" (9:2, 19:23, 24:22). One of the most striking experiences in the early church was that some gentiles were being filled with the Holy Spirit. These were part of a group whom Jews called God-fearers—that is, gentiles who admired and even followed much of the Jewish religion without being formal members of Judaism.

**Council of Jerusalem:** meeting of church leaders at which they decided gentiles did not have to follow Jewish Torah (Law) to be members of the church

The question emerged: Do gentiles, who now believe in Jesus and have received the Holy Spirit, have to become Jewish and take on the full demands of the Torah/Law? Given that Jesus was a Jew and was believed to be the Jewish messiah, and that his ministry was to Jews, no one imagined that he had started a new, separate religion. This was, for those early disciples, the climax of God's promises to his own people. They convened at what is known as the **Council of Jerusalem**, where Acts describes this question as being relatively quickly resolved. The apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas testify to dramatic conversions of gentiles, and how they have been welcomed by Jewish believers without having to take up the Law. Other Pharisee believers insisted that all members of *the Way* had to take on the whole of the Law. Then, Peter spoke about how God did not seem to make distinctions among Jews and gentiles in giving the Holy Spirit, and if God did not first demand Jewish conversion, why should they? It was decided that gentiles did not have to take on the Torah or Law in order to be part of the believing community. James, the head of the Jerusalem church, pronounced the definitive decision: "We should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:19–20).

Acts describes the controversy about gentiles and the Law as settled, and never brings it up again. But letters from Paul to fledgling communities show that the dispute was not settled as cleanly as Acts portrays. We cannot overestimate the importance of this issue. If gentiles had been forced to adopt the Jewish Torah/Law, many of them would probably not have done so, as they hadn't before. They would have remained a Christian version of God-fearers and not fully part of the community. This would apparently have undermined the work of the Holy Spirit, who empowered these gentiles without resort to the Law. It would also have made the movement little more than a small sect of Judaism. If Christianity was to really represent a movement of universal salvation, then the Law would be an extraordinary liability among gentiles. The decision, when fully embraced by the whole church, allowed Christianity to become truly universal.

### *Paul*

One of the most decisive events in the life of the early church was the conversion of a Pharisee named Saul to the Jesus movement. Saul is a Hebrew name, and he is better known by its Greek equivalent, Paul. A persecutor of the movement, Paul had a dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus, after which he became the church's

most important missionary. Paul traveled around Asia Minor proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God. Thirteen of Paul's letters make up a significant part of the New Testament, though some of his letters are disputed as to whether they actually came from his own hand.

Paul's theology is never clearly laid out in his letters, as they are "occasional" letters—that is, letters he wrote to communities that were occasioned by controversies or questions he wanted to address. Certainly, Paul represents the earliest Christian message or ***kerygma***, which was (1) Jesus came in fulfillment of Old Testament promises; (2) Jesus performed mighty deeds and preached the emergent kingdom of God; (3) according to God's plan, Jesus was crucified on the cross and died; (4) God raised him from the dead and made him Lord and Christ; and (5) these events call for the repentance of sins, being baptized in the name of Jesus, and receiving his gift of the Holy Spirit.

***kerygma*:** central, basic teachings in early Christianity

Paul's letters show little interest in the specifics of the ministry or preaching of Jesus. What he was most concerned about theologically was who Jesus was and how Jesus saves believers. Regarding Jesus's identity, Paul draws on two streams of Jewish thought. The first is that of Wisdom, the preexistent creative power of God through which the universe was created. Paul frames Jesus as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created" (Colossians 1:15–16). While he is not the Father (God), still "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9).

The second stream of Jewish thought in Paul's theology is that of an anticipated preexistent messiah who will come to redeem God's chosen ones: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law" (Galatians 4: 4–5). As redeemer, God sent Christ "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). Paul's vision of Christ is utterly cosmic: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Central to Paul's message is the activity of the Holy Spirit. Paul distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, but he also blurs their distinctions. For Paul, the Holy Spirit is something like the sanctifying presence of Christ. The Spirit is a gift from the risen Lord and the vehicle for receiving the love of God (Romans 5:5). The Spirit makes Christians holy (Romans 15:16), reveals God (1 Corinthians 2:10, 13), and guides Christian souls (Galatians 5:18). The gift of the Holy Spirit transforms believers (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians. 5:22).

## *Paul's Soteriology: How Christians Are Saved*

Of central importance for Paul is how humans are saved, and what it means to be justified before God. **Justification** principally means being made upright or righteous (just). Paul believed that to be saved, one had to be justified before God. Further, salvation requires that one understand justification correctly. Paul sometimes even uses the term *justification* as synonymous with salvation itself.

**justification:** being made right or just before God

**sacrificial atonement:** Jewish practice of sacrifice to atone for sins; Christians saw Jesus's death as an absolute atonement for the sins of the world

Before the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, sacrifices were offered daily and for several reasons. Three types of sacrifices are particularly important to understand Christian theology. Sacrifices were offered (1) to ratify covenants, (2) to atone for sins, and (3) to obtain communion with God. Early Christians saw Jesus's death on the cross as involving all three. The new covenant he proclaimed at the Last Supper was ratified by his sacrifice on the cross. This sacrifice was also a **sacrificial atonement** for sins: Jesus died for our sins, and through Jesus's sacrifice, we now have access to communion with God.

"For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

—Galatians 2:19–20

While Paul addresses all three understandings of sacrifice in his letters, he emphasizes atonement. Here, the resurrection also becomes crucial. The cross atones for sin, and the resurrection breaks the bonds of death, allowing for salvation. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul provides an interpretation of the history of salvation. The controversy among the Galatians was whether non-Jewish believers had to take on the Jewish Law. This seemed to have been settled in the Council of Jerusalem, but as mentioned, not everyone was on board. In Galatians, Paul could have simply reminded them of the Council's decision. And while Paul did that, he also argued that the time of the Law was over. In short, the covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai, by which Jews received the Torah (Law), was a provisional covenant, one for training in holiness while awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. Jesus fulfilled that initial covenant and brought salvation history to its completion. Paul continued to live a faithful Jewish lifestyle, but his teaching that the time of the Torah was over became a decisive theological claim.

## Split from Judaism

The primitive church understood itself as thoroughly Jewish. Jesus was Jewish and proclaimed a kingdom of God that drew entirely on Old Testament themes. "Messiah" is an exclusively Jewish idea, and all his disciples were Jewish. When Paul discusses the acceptance of gentiles into the early church, he does so with the image of Israel as the tree of salvation onto which gentiles are grafted. It is essentially certain that Jesus did not intend to create a new religion. Given all this, how did Christianity become *Christianity*?

One of the most decisive events in the history of Judaism was also one of the most crucial in the emergence of Christianity as a separate religion: the Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple (66–70 CE). In this revolt and the subsequent Roman victory, all leadership in Judaism fell to the Pharisee movement, the only group to survive. They created Rabbinic Judaism and had the opportunity to provide a united theology. By the late first century, at least in Palestine, synagogue worship renounced the sect that promoted Jesus as the messiah. Thus, reverence for Jesus became a heresy, and believers were not welcome. Even when this policy of eliminating believers from the synagogue was not in force, we can easily imagine a natural shifting of loyalties and communities. Jewish believers in Jesus gathered under different leadership on

Sunday to share fellowship and the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper. This group would have been their main support. Another important factor was that faith in Jesus tended to undermine the prominence of the Torah, or Law. Recall that Paul insisted justification came not from obedience to Torah but only as a grace of Christ and, further, that the time of the Torah had ended.

There is also the sociological factor: By the end of the first century, the majority of believers in Jesus were gentiles and not Jews. Imagine the year 35, when an assembly of a hundred believers might likely be made up of five gentiles and ninety-five Jews. Now imagine the year 105, when the same-size assembly might have had ninety-five gentiles and five Jews. It simply looks and feels very different, regardless of its historical pedigree. The first century also saw a shift in Roman interest. The Roman emperor Claudius (r. 41–54) expelled many Jews from Rome for causing disturbances "at the instigation of Chrestus" (Christ). We see here a complete association between Jews and believers in Jesus. In the rule of Nero (r. 54–68), however, Christians (not Jews) were falsely blamed for a large fire in Rome and persecuted. In this short time, we see the Roman Empire coming to distinguish Christians from Jews.

# The Life of the Early Church

## The Threefold Ministry and the Catholic Church

Beyond the apostles, we find in the New Testament groups of leaders who are often called *presbyters* (elders). Acts also references servant-leaders known as *deacons*. Leadership at this time was typically a collective venture. Sometimes the New Testament also identifies bishops or overseers (*episkopoi*), but this designation seems to be equivalent with that of presbyters. By the late first or early second century, a pattern of church leadership emerged. Each Christian congregation had a single leader, a bishop or overseer who was directly supported by a group of elders and a group of deacons. These offices were also imagined to be essentially permanent positions, barring scandal.

In the early second century, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote to a number of churches while he was in chains on route to Rome to be martyred. In these letters, we get glimpse of what was going on in early second-century Christianity. Church harmony dominates as his chief concern. Intimately related to this issue is his insistence that such harmony can only come from observing the threefold structure of ministerial leadership:

- "Thus it is proper for you to run together in harmony with the mind of the bishop, as in fact you are doing. For your council of presbyters . . . is attuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre. Therefore in your unanimity and harmonious love Jesus Christ is sung."

- "Be eager to do everything in a godly harmony. The bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of apostles, and the deacons, who are especially dear to me, since they have been entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ."
- "There is only one altar, just as there is only one bishop, together with the council of presbyters and deacons."[3]

Ignatius was the first to use what became a common term for Christianity: *he katholike ekklesia*, the Catholic Church. *Katholikos* means "of the whole" or "universal." *Ekklesia* is typically translated as "church," though it literally means "assembly." Each Christian community understood itself as a church, an assembly where the body of Christ met, baptized new members, and celebrated the Eucharist. It was, however, a church that belonged to the universal church. The whole church was expressed both locally in churches and universally as a large collective of churches. These ministers, particularly the bishop, represented the local church. The communion of local churches with the larger *katholikos* was carried out by the bishop who represented his local church. Agreement among bishops collectively created this communion. Eventually, bishops would identify not with a singular assembly but with a region, representing administrative districts of the Roman Empire.

## Persecutions and Apologists

There were many religious traditions throughout the Roman Empire, and all of these were tolerated—with the caveat that their adherents had to concede that the emperor was also a god (or some manifestation of the divine). Thus, making offerings to the emperor showed one's loyalty and patriotism. Judaism was the only religion exempt from this requirement, with the exemption framed as respect for an ancient religion. More likely, it was exempt because Jews simply would not worship the emperor. Christians did not enjoy this exemption. They were ridiculed for worshipping a man who had been killed, and they were regarded as unpatriotic.

**confessor:** Christian term for those who suffered torture for their faith but still lived

**martyr:** refers to Christians who were killed because of their faith; literally "witness"

It was against the law to be a Christian. Still, Roman authorities were mostly concerned about public order and gathering taxes. Christians were, by and large, left alone, and they kept a low profile to ensure this. Periodically, however, in a given province they were harassed, persecuted, and even killed. Those severely persecuted but not killed were called by the church **confessors**, for heroically retaining their faith under torture. Those killed were called **martyrs**, a term that literally means "witness."

Roman policy changed toward Christians over the period from 249 to 260. Emperor Decius (r. 249–251) ordered a general sacrifice to the gods, and Christians refused to participate. Anti-Christian riots erupted throughout the empire. In 257, Emperor Valerian became convinced that the gods were offended by the Christians because of their disloyalty to the empire. Unlike Decius's general sacrifice, Valerian

## Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas

The day of their victory shone forth, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheater, as if to an assembly, joyous and of brilliant countenances; if perchance shrinking, it was with joy and not with fear. Perpetua followed with a placid look, and with step and gait as a matron of Christ, beloved of God; casting down the luster of her eyes from the gaze of all. Moreover, Felicitas, rejoicing that she had [been] safely brought forth, so that she might fight with the wild beasts. . . . When they came within sight of Hilarianus, by gesture and nod, they began to say to Hilarianus, "Thou judgest us," say they, "But God will judge thee." At this the people, exasperated, demanded that they should be tormented with scourges as they passed along the rank of the venatores. And they indeed rejoiced that they should have incurred any one of their Lord's passions.

And when the populace called for them into the midst, that as the sword penetrated into their body they might make their eyes partners in the murder, they rose up of their own accord, and transferred themselves whither the people wished; but they first kissed one another, that they might consummate their martyrdom with the kiss of peace.

Source: Tertullian, "The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas," *Early Christian Writings* accessed at http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/tertullian.html

directed one explicitly toward Christians. Since many local magistrates knew who the bishops, presbyters, and deacons were, these people in particular were rounded up and ordered to sacrifice. In the authorities' attempts to break them, many were mutilated during their torture. Some broke down and did renounce their faith, others withstood the torture and were released as broken men, and many others were executed. Before Valerian could fully implement his empire-wide persecution, however, he died in captivity in Persia. Gruesomely, he was skinned, stuffed, and used as the Persian king's footstool. Valerian's son Gallienus (r. 260–268) halted the persecution and restored confiscated property to the churches.

Perhaps the greatest persecution was instigated by Diocletian (r. 284–305). By then, Christians had experienced three decades of peace, and some among their numbers were prominent citizens and members of the government. During an official ceremony, these Christians in court refused to participate in a ceremony that included divination using the entrails of animals. Diocletian went into a rage and ordered that all church buildings be destroyed and Christian assemblies forbidden. Within weeks, Christians were stripped of their legal rights. Initially, Diocletian refrained from imposing torture and the death penalty, only imprisoning Christians. But this was to change, and the church witnessed its greatest number of martyrs during this persecution.

While the church suffered persecutions sporadically, even if at times intensely, much of its relationship with the wider culture was one of disdain. Christianity seemed to many a superstition born from lower-class, uneducated people. Some Romans considered Christians atheists, because they did not believe in the gods. Others, with

little knowledge of what Christians understood the Eucharist to be, imagined that they even practiced cannibalism by consuming the body and blood of Christ.

**apologists:** Christian intellectuals who defended the faith against outside critique

We know of about ten formal public "apologies" of Christianity in the second and third centuries. The word *apology* comes from the Latin *apologia*, which means "defense." And some Christian intellectuals made it their ministry to defend the faith intellectually with arguments for Christianity's truth; they were the **apologists**. For example, Justin (100–165) wrote an apology to the emperor Antonius Pius (r. 138–161) and the Roman Senate. Christians had been considered immoral, even practicing incest. Justin responded that Christians were of the highest morality. They pay their taxes and are loyal, disciplined, honest, generous, and peaceful. Why, he asked, would immoral people be willing to endure torture and death if they could avoid such punishment by mere superficial sacrifices to the emperor or the gods? Justin also challenged traditional Roman religiosity by showing that many celebrated myths betray the gods themselves as immoral. He also pointed out that many respected philosophers, such as Plato, believed in one absolute God.

"Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment."

—Justin Martyr as cited in *The First Apology of Justin: The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I*, rev. ed. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996; Roberts and Donaldson eds.

Other famous apologists were Origen (185–254) and Tertullian (160–220). Origen, the most famous Christian theologian of the early church, wrote a response to the Greek philosopher Celsus, who had attacked Christianity. Tertullian wrote at least three apologies, which are considered the most famous of such writings.

## Baptism and Eucharist

**baptism:** rite of Christian initiation

**Eucharist:** rite of the Lord's Supper, celebrating Christ's death and resurrection and communion with God

From the start, Christians practiced two rituals that would ground their identity: baptism and the Eucharist. Being plunged into the water during baptism represented entering the tomb with Christ, and rising from it was rising to a wholly new life. In **baptism**, converts were proclaimed washed free of their sins. They were "illuminated" and admitted to the ranks of the faithful. In the **patristic period**, typically adult initiates had to undergo a training period of three years before being considered ready for the full conversion to the faith.

"Did you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

—Romans 6:3–4

The **Eucharist**, or Lord's Supper, was also essential to Christian identity. Christians gathered on Sunday evening, the day commemorating the resurrection, and celebrated the rite of "thanksgiving," the translation of *Eucharistia*. The Eucharist was understood as a shared meal of thanksgiving for Jesus's salvation. But it was imagined to be much more profound. Two themes were prominent: sacrifice and communion with God through the body and blood of Jesus in the form of bread and wine. These two themes intertwined in the mind of the church fathers. Consider this witness from Irenaeus of Lyons in his book *Against Heresies*:

> Again, giving direction to His disciples to offer to God the first-fruits of His own created things. . . . He took that created thing, bread, and gave thanks, and said, "This is my body." And the cup likewise, which is part of that creation to which we belong. He confessed to be his blood, and taught the new

> oblation of the new covenant; which the Church receiving from the apostles, offers to God throughout all the world. . . . The oblation of the Church . . . [is] a pure sacrifice, and is acceptable to Him. . . . Inasmuch, then, as the Church offers with single-mindedness her gift is justly reckoned a pure sacrifice with God. . . . Then again, how can they say that the flesh, which is nourished with the body of the Lord and with His blood, goes into corruption and does not partake of life? . . . For we offer to Him [the Father] His own [the Son], announcing consistently the fellowship and union of the flesh and Spirit. For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.[4]

In this text, Irenaeus is arguing against certain Gnostic Christians who believed the created world was evil or inconsequential and who thus denied the resurrection of the body. Irenaeus uses the Eucharist as his counterargument. If the physical bread and wine can become the actual body and blood of Jesus—something now heavenly and incorruptible—so, too, can the human body become spiritualized. And it does so through participation in the Eucharist. Further, we see that the Eucharist is regularly referred to as both the original sacrifice of Christ on the cross and a sacrifice made by the church.

Sacred rites facilitate transformative experiences through a given tradition's archetypal (core) symbols. The rituals become *presentations* of the reality symbolized—that is, become realizations of that reality. Irenaeus regards Christians celebrating the Eucharist as symbolically entering into the original sacrifice of Christ and its participants, offering themselves to God through it, and further, communing with the actual body and blood of Jesus, now risen and glorified. Ignatius of Antioch also criticized those who did not "acknowledge that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ." In his view, the Eucharistic food is the "medicine of immortality."[5] Early apologists Tertullian and Justin insisted to the pagan world that in the Lord's Supper, "He made it His own body," and we are nourished by "the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh."[6]

## Christian Rigor, Asceticism, and Virginity

Given that Christians believed baptism made them new persons, they insisted that the Christian life be lived with great moral rigor. The general culture was often characterized as the place of yielding to passions such as greed, anger, and lust. Life in the church, they demanded, had to be stridently virtuous. Of course, it is not as though a Christian was free from giving into temptations, but the culture of the church was quite highly moral. Some sins, such as adultery, were particularly

**Order of Penitents:** being placed in public penance for egregious sins and forbidden from communion

**consecrated virginity:** vowing a lifelong celibate life for the sake of the kingdom of God

egregious. Christians debated whether such sins warranted permanent excommunication. The general consensus was that Christians guilty of serious wrongdoing and now repentant could return to the faith, but not easily. They were required to enter into a process that came known as the **Order of Penitents**. During this period of penance, they continued to go to church but were barred from receiving communion. They stood apart while the rest of the community prayed for them on this journey of spiritual recovery. When the bishop decided that their period of repentance was complete, he received them back into full communion. Penance could last years.

Some Christians publicly committed themselves to **consecrated virginity**—that is, to a lifelong vow of celibacy. Christians, along with many Greco-Roman philosophers, viewed the body as morally fragile. Many Christians particularly distrusted sex and thus highly commended celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. A celibate Christian life was imagined to be wholly dedicated to God. The church's concern with sexual passion and physical pleasure shows a decided shift from its Jewish heritage. The rabbis did not idealize the ascetic who shunned the world and its pleasures, but extolled those who knew how to live in moderation and take pleasure in the fullness and richness of creation. This was not the culture of the early church.

"The custom of the Romans [Church of Rome] from antiquity has always been, after sexual intercourse with one's spouse, both to cleanse oneself by washing and to abstain reverently from entering the church for a time. . . . For such pleasure cannot be without sin."

—Pope Gregory the Great, *Epistolarum liber*, IX.64

Consecrated virginity also afforded Christian women an additional bonus: It freed them from the control of a patriarchal married culture and opened a way for greater participation and informal leadership in the Christian community. Surely, many women, Christian or otherwise, wanted to marry. Many loved their husbands, were loved by them, and were grateful for children. Still, it was a restrictive life. In contrast, virginity for the sake of the kingdom challenged the social structure of the day and opted for a different cultural and ecclesial arrangement.

## Veneration of Saints

Christians believed—and still do—that every member of the church is part of the mystical body of Christ. That is, Christians are not merely individuals who believe in Jesus, but together have a corporate identity. Christians who had died remain an active part of that body. Further, saints—particularly martyrs—represent heroes of the faith who manifested the presence and transforming possibilities of God's grace in their lives. Given their extraordinary holiness and their continued presence in the mystical body, they were thought to intercede for those still on earth.

Saints were seen as somehow uniting heaven and earth, and their tombs were particularly hallowed, like poles where heaven and earth met. The fourth-century Greek historian Eunapius of Sardis mocked Christians for this practice: "For they collected bones and skulls of criminals . . . [and] made them out to be gods. . . . *Martyrs* the dead men were called, and ministers of a sort, and ambassadors with the gods to carry men's prayers."[7] These shrines were considered

particularly holy because the remains were believed to be relics that represented the saints on earth in a special, powerful way. In many respects, a saint became a spiritual version of a Roman patron—that is, a wealthy benefactor who took others under his wing and financed their worthy undertaking. Historian Peter Brown has remarked, "The saint was a good *patronus*: he was the *patronus* whose intercessions were successful, whose wealth was at the disposal of all, whose *potentia* [power] was exercised without violence and to whom loyalty could be shown without restraint."[8]

**patristic period:** era of the church from around 125 to 500, characterized by the full formation of the church, including its rites, theology, dogmas, and canon

## Monasticism

From the late third century onward, a particular form of Christian life came to be recognized as one of the most venerable: monasticism. *Monachos*, Greek for "solitary," is the word from which we get monk and *monasticism*. These were devout men and women who took asceticism, celibacy, and prayer to their farthest lengths by devoting themselves to lives of virtually continual prayer. Expressions of early monasticism varied. In Syria, there were often fraternities of monks who lived in their own huts close to each other, prayed together daily, and served the needs of the local church. In Egypt, they initially lived alone in the desert, but sufficiently close to each other to allow for mentor relationships. It was considered a kind of living martyrdom, and some monks had the reputation of high holiness and even spiritual powers of healing.

The greatest representative of early monasticism was Antony of Egypt (251–356). St. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote about him in a book called *Life of Antony*. It instantly became a classic and was translated and disseminated across the Roman Empire. Antony's life was one of progressive withdrawal, after having been mentored by another "man of prayer." Interestingly, while monks were praised by lay Christians and bishops alike, they lived lives that were actually anti-institutional. It was an alternative Christianity.

**anchoritic monasticism:** life of a monk who after sufficient guidance would live alone, focused on prayer and fasting

Antony was a model of **anchoritic monasticism**—that is, the solitary life. But there was another model, **coenobitic monasticism**, from *koinos*, meaning "communal." These monks lived in community, believing that the solitary life was potentially dangerous. In the anchoritic life, there was little to keep bizarre personalities in check; while there were many famous and holy spiritual masters, there were also unbalanced and reckless monks. Pachomius (290–346), another Egyptian, is the most famous innovator of the communal life. He argued that spiritual pride and lack of discretion could easily dominate the psyches of solitary monks. The monastery provided a lifestyle that brought competent training, mutual support, and accountability. Pachomius was wildly successful. He founded nine monasteries and by 330 had roughly 9,000 monks living under his rule.

**coenobitic monasticism:** life of monks who lived together in a monastery for mutual support and prayer

**abbot:** the head and spiritual guide in a monastery

***The Rule of Benedict*:** Benedict of Nursia's monastic rule known for its balance and mutual support

The monastic life in the West became dominated by two figures. The first, John Cassian (360–435), learned about monasticism in Palestine and Egypt. Migrating to

As monasteries were the centers of learning in the "dark ages," monks regularly copied classic texts and kept the largest libraries in the West at the time.

the West, he wrote a book of rules for monks, *The Institutes*, and a large volume called *The Conferences*, a collection of dialogues with Egyptian monks. These two books had enormous influence on Western monasticism. The second figure, Benedict of Nursia (480–543), initially embraced the anchoritic life but was asked by monks in Vicovaro to be the abbot, or leader, of their monastery. Benedict's early tenure as an **abbot** was disastrous. He was so strict with the brothers that they rebelled and even tried to poison him. Leaving this disaster behind, he started another monastery, and then founded his most famous one in the hills of Cassino, about 80 miles south of Rome. Here, he wrote his own rule, ***The Rule of Benedict***. In contrast with his earlier experience, monastic life under *The Rule of Benedict* was noted by its sense of balance, and his *Rule* eventually became the standard for the Western church.

# Premodern Classical Era (313–1517)

## The Imperial Church

**Constantine:** emperor who ruled the western Roman Empire from 312 to 324 and the whole empire from 324 to 337, favored Christianity, and sought a union of Christianity and the Empire.

Emperor Diocletian had divided the empire into sections ruled by an imperial board and co-emperors as a way to restore stability to a weakening empire. **Constantine's** father had been one of the three co-emperors with Diocletian, who died in 305. When Constantine's father died in 306, Constantine succeeded him. For the next several years, Constantine battled for control of the western half of the empire against Maxentius. In 312, a decisive battle was waged at the Milvian Bridge, just outside of Rome. Before the battle, Constantine had a vivid dream that he would win the battle if he fought under the sign of the Christian God. He ordered that the first two letters of the Greek spelling of "Christ"—a chi (χ) and a rho (ρ)—be placed on men's shields; it would have looked like this: ☧. Constantine triumphed, and the following year, he and the emperor of the east, Licinius, promulgated the Edict of Milan (313), which mandated religious toleration. By 324, Constantine defeated Licinius and became the sole emperor. Constantine then moved the imperial throne to Byzantion, a city at the entrance to the Black Sea. He renamed it Constantinople after himself, though the old name also persisted, eventually being Latinized to Byzantium. While the Western

The Constantinian unification of church and state is illustrated in this Roman mosaic showing the Roman emperor at the center as the unifying ruler of both the state (on his right) and church (on his left).

Roman Empire would eventually collapse over the next century, the Eastern Roman Empire—that is, the Byzantine Empire—would remain for the next 1,000 years.

Constantine would be baptized at the end of his life, and during his reign he supported Christianity. He devoted government funds to Christian charitable works and built impressive churches, including the Basilica of John Lateran and another on the traditional grave of Saint Peter. With his mother Helena's initiative, he also built a great church in Jerusalem where Christ was said to have been buried and resurrected, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Further, he gave Christian clergy tax exemptions and the authority to act as judges in civil cases. He even made Sunday an official day of rest in Constantinople.

Constantine's understanding of Christianity and his role in it reflect a dramatic change within the Christian ethos. In effect, he created the conditions for a *Christian nation*, and he saw himself as ruler over this newly formed alliance. He and his succeeding emperors called church councils to decide on controversial issues and forcibly exiled those church leaders who would not submit to the decisions of the larger church. Now, instead of being ambivalent (at best) about the Roman Empire, Christians were expected to be vigorous supporters of it. From this point on, Christians tended to equate Christianity with the Roman Empire, something bound to

compromise consciences all around. The institutional church would eventually use its newly gained power to persecute heretics and unbelievers. Further, as we saw in Chapter 3, Jews progressively lost many of their legal protections in the Roman Empire, and even Persian Christians were suspected of being traitors.

## Councils and Dogmas

**doctrine:** religious teaching of importance and expected to be accepted as part of the faith

**dogma:** core religious teaching deemed to be essential to the faith

The canon of the New Testament came relatively late. Of course, most of the texts that made it into the canon were widely used far earlier, but it would not be until the late fourth century that Christianity definitively concluded its canon. One reason is that communication among bishops was difficult, and large gatherings of bishops were unheard of. A parallel can be seen with regard to the development of doctrine, particularly dogmas of Christianity. A **doctrine** is a religious teaching of importance and ought to be widely accepted. A **dogma**, however, represents a core teaching that is presumably unalterable. Christians were in relative agreement on many issues early on; the kerygma noted earlier was not controversial. But despite this general agreement, a great deal of plurality remained in the exact beliefs about the nature of Jesus; the relationships among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and other important theological issues.

**ecumenical council:** gathering of all bishops to determine church teachings and policies

Periodically, emperors called bishops together to decide on these issues, believing that the authenticity of Christianity was at stake. The fullest expressions of these bishops' councils are called **ecumenical councils**, with *ecumenical* meaning "worldwide." Traditionally, there are understood to have been seven councils that included both East and West, but the first four are the most critical. These councils were held in the fourth and fifth centuries and established dogmas for what later became Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant communities. They were councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

Following their Jewish heritage, Christians claimed that they were monotheists, that there is only one God. Was Jesus then God? If the Father is God and Jesus is not the Father, then how could Jesus be God? Was he merely human, someone God raised to a glorified status? Was he fully human? What about the Holy Spirit? Was the Spirit distinct from God, part of God, another God? Although Christians believed in just one God, the language they used in speaking about Jesus and the Holy Spirit seemed to assign divinity to them. Were they then actually tritheists (three Gods)? Many of the New Testament texts reference Jesus as subordinate to God. For example, Paul writes, "There is one God, the Father from whom all things exist and for whom all things exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:6). Here, Paul claims we come *from* God, but live *through* Jesus. Later in this same letter, Paul says that when all things are subjected to Jesus, Jesus will subject them *and himself* to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Arius (256–336) was a priest and influential theologian from Alexandria, a theological center for Christianity. He argued that the Son could not be God proper, but

was in some way subordinate to God. Arius taught that the Son emanated from the Father as a created being. The Alexandrian bishop Alexander held a synod with other local bishops, and they denounced Arius's position. Yet other bishops were sympathetic to Arius's theology.

In 325, Emperor Constantine called the first council at Nicaea to decide the issue. The majority of bishops believed that the Son was fully divine. While both sides appealed to scripture, their principal argument came from two other sources. First, they had been worshipping Jesus from the beginning. And if Jesus were not fully divine, this would be idolatry. The argument appealed to a principle that came to be known as *lex orandi, lex credendi*—that is, the law of worship is the law of belief. Second, they argued that, since Jesus was the savior and redeemed them from sin, he had to be fully divine as these are prerogatives of God, not another created being. The majority decided that the Son's divine nature must be eternal and of the "same substance" as the Father (*homoousios*), rather than of a "similar substance" (*homoiousios*). The bishops also created a **creed** at Nicaea, a short summary statement of decisive beliefs that ensured this decision would be asserted throughout Christianity.

**creed:** short summary of beliefs to be universally held

Despite the establishment of the creed at Nicaea, many Christians in the eastern part of the empire remained "Arians." In 380, Emperor Theodosius published the edict *Cunctos Populos*, which mandated acceptance of the creed of Nicaea. He also made the bishops of Rome and Alexandria final judges of orthodox doctrine and mandated that Christianity be the official religion of the Empire. In 381, Theodosius convened a council in Constantinople that expanded the creed. The council of Constantinople and, later, the Council of Ephesus relied a great deal on three theologians: Basil of Caesarea (330–379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), who are collectively known as the "Cappadocian Fathers," coming from Cappadocia (modern Turkey). They insisted that all conceptualizations of God are only analogous to the divine reality because human language is limited. They also argued that the *members* of the **Trinity** should be considered distinct, but not as separate beings. Rather, the *persons* represent different *relations* within God. They also clarified what *substance* could mean regarding God. Substance, they argued, was not a *thing* but a nature—in this case, the divine nature. So God was understood as having one substance (divine nature), and that substance was also understood as having three inner relations (persons).

**Trinity:** The Christian belief that the one God has inner dynamic relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon wrestled with more questions about Jesus and the Trinity. Regarding Jesus, they concluded that he had two full natures—human and divine—and that these were never blurred or "confused" with each other—that is, they both retained their unique integrity. Regarding the Trinity, they had to deal with several possible positions. One position was that God the Father was God proper and that the Son and Holy Spirit were subordinate by nature. Another was that God is experienced by us in three expressions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but God *as* God is not triune. A third amounted to three distinct beings, each of which has the same divine nature. All three were unacceptable. What they concluded was that the very nature of the divine was actually a dynamic relationality of Father, Son, and Holy

This fifteenth-century miniature painting by Nicola Polani depicts Augustine writing *The City of God.*

Spirit. There was a kind of priority in that the Father *begets* the Son and the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father. But this is something that was eternal. There was never a Father without a Son or Holy Spirit.

In his monumental treatise *The Trinity*, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the West's most influential theologian, offers two analogies. One is *Mind-Thinking-Thought.* An active mind, Augustine states, must think, and it must think thoughts. There is never an active mind that is not engaged in these simultaneously. Even though mind, thinking, and thought can be distinguished from one another, they form a necessary collective. Augustine's second analogy is *Love-Beloved-Love-Shared.* For one to love, he argued, there has to be a beloved, and the communion in love they have is necessarily part of the relationship. There is never one without the other two. These are, he conceded, only human analogies. Still, he thought it was possible to distinguish three relations, and even have an originating relation, without violating the necessity of all three happening at once and necessitating each other.

## Church and State

From Constantine onward, there was a symbiotic relationship between church and state. With the exception of Julian's two-year rule (361–363), the emperors were all Christians and understood themselves as important to the life of the church. It was the emperor, not the bishops, who called the councils, and emperors did not hesitate to exile bishops who failed to accept the councils' decisions—that is, unless an emperor himself had not. Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Emperor Justinian (r. 527–565) revised Roman law so that it would better integrate Christian values. Justinian's Code (*Codex Juris Civilis*) was foundational for many European systems of civil law over the centuries. And while Constantine had surely seen himself as the head of the state, and thus responsible for religion in it, Justinian and other emperors saw themselves as head of both church and state, an arrangement sometimes referred to as **Caesaro-papism**.

"We all with one accord teach . . . the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separations; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union . . . coming together to form one person."

—Church Council of Chalcedon

The supposed fusion of identities of the church and the state ironically led to some fragmentation of the church. Some Christian churches did not accept the conclusions of the Council of Chalcedon and operated independently. The church in the Persian Empire, a competitor and enemy of the Byzantine Empire, began to assert its own independence and identity as well. In rejecting Chalcedon, Christians from such diverse regions as Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Armenia asserted independence from the Byzantine Empire.

### Patriarchal Sees

**Caesaro-papism:** the political and religious entwinement where the emperor understood himself as head of the church as well as the state

Bishops represented the authority of the apostles and the symbolic unity of the church. Not only were they the overseers of a local church, but their communion with each other represented the *katholikos ekklesia*, the catholic or universal church. As Christianity developed, these bishops became overseers of dioceses or municipal areas, typically centered on large cities. With multiple gatherings, presbyters acted as the bishop's representatives in each. The principal church building in a diocese was call a cathedral. A *cathedra* means "chair," as in chair of authority. Further, local dioceses were grouped together into provinces, which had the same boundaries as the state's provinces. These provinces were presided over by the bishop of the capital of the province, called the metropolitan. Typically, the metropolitan chose or had great influence over who would become bishops in his province.

**patriarchal sees:** ultimately five authoritative centers of Christianity, presided over a bishop who oversaw metropolitan elections of bishops

The Council of Nicaea allowed for an exception through the establishment of **patriarchal sees**. *Patriarch* refers to an authoritative father figure, and *see* refers to seat, as in "seat of authority." Nicaea created three patriarchal sees: Antioch (Syria), Alexandria (Egypt), and Rome (Italy). These three cities were the largest in the empire, and they had the advantage of containing long-standing, authoritative Christian communities. The Council of Constantinople (381) added Jerusalem and Constantinople, the latter because it was understood as the "new Rome." The Council of Chalcedon divided up the Roman world into these five patriarchates, in which the patriarch had the privilege of presiding over metropolitan elections.

The relationship of the five patriarchal sees is complicated, particularly regarding the claims of the Roman See. The Council of Constantinople declared that the See of Rome was the highest in terms of honor. The bishop of Rome, however, saw his place as more authoritative than what was implied by mere honor—and, indeed, so did many of the bishops of the East, who periodically appealed to Rome to adjudicate issues in their own territories. Rome would later assert that it had juridical authority over the whole of Christianity, a claim that is at the heart of the divide between East and West, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

## The Medieval Church

### Christian Expansions in the East

Most readers of this textbook are probably more interested in Christianity in the West, particularly as it had such an important role in Western culture. But we would be remiss to neglect its medieval spread elsewhere. While Egypt was part of the Byzantine Empire, most of it never really participated in the Byzantine culture. South

of Alexandria, Egyptians spoke Coptic, and the Coptic Church did not accept the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. It thus remained an independent church. This independence probably allowed it to survive Muslim invasion in the seventh century, as Muslims did not perceive it to be a political threat.

South of Egypt was Nubia, a country stretching from the Nile's first cataract at Aswan to Ethiopia. Christianity had modestly penetrated its borders, but it was not until the sixth century that the emperor Justinian was persuaded by his wife Theodora to send a mission to Nubia. With lightning speed, Nubia became a Christian nation, displacing the traditional religion of the Nubian people. Christian culture flourished into the tenth century, even as Muslim advances were taking over Arabia and North Africa. Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, Christianity essentially disappeared in Nubia, mostly due to Islamic dominance and the progressive replacement of the native tongue with Arabic.

According to Rufinus's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*, the missionizing of Ethiopia was something of a combination of heroic witness and luck. Meropius, a Christian intellectual, was traveling with two young companions to India in order to spread the Gospel. On the way, they stopped at the port of Adulis, Ethiopia. There, Meropius was killed, and his two companions, Frumentius and Aedesius, were taken as slaves for the king. Through the years, they became high officials in the king's administration. At the king's death, they were given leave to return home, but the king's mother asked them to remain as administrators until her next-in-line son came of age. Frumentius encouraged Christian merchants to settle in Askum, and they formed a small Christian community. Soon, the young king himself became a convert and robust supporter of the faith. Ethiopian Christianity saw itself as something of a renewed Israel, and its national epic, *Kebra Nagast* (*Glory of the Kings*), details how the biblical queen of Sheba was impregnated by King Solomon. This was the true Israel.

Persian Christians who had not accepted the Council of Chalcedon were known as the Church of the East. These Christians continued to missionize across the Middle East and are today the principal form of Christianity in southeastern Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. The Church of the East was also responsible for the development of Christianity in India, Sri Lanka, and China. Tradition has it that the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India in the first century. The story is found in the Acts of Thomas from the third or fourth century. As the story goes, the risen Christ appeared to Thomas in a dream and commanded him to evangelize India. Shortly after, Thomas met a representative of Gundaphar, the king of Punjab, who needed an architect to build the king's palace. Thomas agreed to the job and ended up using some of the king's money to feed the starving poor. The king was outraged until he also had a dream, this one showing his royal palace in heaven made by his gifts to the poor. The king then converted to Christianity. The story, of course, stretches believability, but it is the case that Byzantine

Christians in the late second century discovered that Christianity had been already established itself in India.

Due to the missionizing efforts of the Church of the East as well as the trade routes from the Middle East to China, known collectively as the Silk Road, Christianity had a presence in China by the sixth century and enjoyed a well-established presence by the eighth. In an imperial decree of that era, we find the following:

> The Persian monk A-lo-pen has come from afar bringing scriptures and teaching. . . . The meaning of the teaching has been carefully examined; it is mysterious, wonderful, calm; it fixes the essentials of life and perfection; it is the salvation of living beings; it is the wealth of man. It is right that it should spread through the empire. Therefore let the local officials build a monastery in the I-ning quarter with twenty-one regular monks.[9]

The conversion of Armenia came with the mission of Gregory "the illuminator." Gregory's father was accused of trying to overthrow the king and was executed. As a child he fled the country, but returned to spread the Gospel and atone for his father's sin. Known for his holiness, Gregory was called back to court to heal the aging King Tiridates III (d. 330). Miraculously healed, the king then converted to Christianity, destroyed all pagan shrines, and replaced them with Christian churches. Georgia was converted though a similarly inspiring miracle that saved its Queen Nana. Neither Armenia nor Georgia had its own alphabet, so Christian leaders created one to pass along the scriptures and liturgy. This became the foundation for independent literature to develop in these cultures. Slavic lands, such as southern Russia, Hungary, Moravia, and the Balkans, were missionized in the ninth century, and Poland and Bohemia in the tenth. Russia, under Vladimir, adopted the faith in the tenth century as well.

Many of these conversions, particularly the Russian, were tied up with politics. Slavic countries saw an advantage in aligning themselves with the Byzantine Empire, which boasted a high culture and advanced trade. This is not to say these conversions of Slavic monarchs were not sincere. Rather, it seems more like they saw conversion to the faith as part of a larger picture of cultural development. The conversions of these lands were something of a "top-down" affair. No one imagined a separation of church and state, and the religion of the people was assumed to be the religion of the monarch. Governments funded missionaries and built churches. Bishops or their representative priests baptized people en masse, often thousands at a time. Instead of a lengthy process of faith formation in an individual—the style of the early church—people were assumed to take on the faith more deeply as they went along. The change from individual conversions to mass baptisms cannot be overestimated. The degree to which most ordinary citizens became authentically Christian would have to happen throughout their lifetime or over the next several generations.

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Portion of the Text of the Nestorian Stele

The following is a small portion of a monolith found in China. It represents how Chinese Christians understood the faith:

Behold the unchangeably true and invisible, who existed through all eternity without origin; the far-seeing perfect intelligence, whose mysterious existence is everlasting; operating on primordial substance he created the universe, being more excellent than all holy intelligences, inasmuch as he is the source of all that is honorable. This is our eternal true lord God, triune and mysterious. . . . Thereupon, our Trinity being divided in nature, the illustrious and honorable Messiah, veiling his true dignity, appeared in the world as a man . . . he established the new religion of the silent operation of the pure spirit of the Triune; he rendered virtue subservient to direct faith; he fixed the extent of the eight boundaries, thus completing the truth and freeing it from dross; he opened the gate of the three constant principles, introducing life and destroying death . . . he set in motion the vessel of mercy by which to ascend to the bright mansions, whereupon rational beings were then released, having thus completed the manifestation of his power, in clear day he ascended to his true station.[10]

Created in eighth-century China, the Nestorian Stele details a Chinese form of the Christian message.

## Christian Expansions in the West

### *The "Barbarians"*

Historians typically use one of two dates to mark the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages: 410, when Alaric the Goth sacked Rome, or 476, when the Roman general Flavius Odoacer deposed the last Western emperor and declared himself king of Italy. These were surely decisive landmark events, but the transformation of the Western Empire—and its collapse—was far more complex. North of the Roman Empire's borders were peoples who spoke versions of a Germanic language. These included the Goths, Vandals, Lombards, and Burgundians, but the Romans lumped them all together as "barbarians." From around 100 to 400 CE, the Empire faced them along loosely controlled borders, such as the Rhine and Danube rivers.

The Romans, both East and West, dealt with these peoples by bribes and playing their rivalries off each other, but funds dwindled. In 376, the Eastern Emperor Valens (r. 364–378) allowed the Visigoths, who were fleeing the incursions of Attila the Hun, to cross the Danube into Roman territory. The Visigoths came peacefully, but they had no intention of either leaving or being absorbed into the Roman Empire. In 378, Valens met the Visigoths in battle at Adrianople in modern-day Turkey, and the imperial forces were decimated and Valens killed. In 410, the Visigoth Alaric looted Rome. He died shortly after, and his army migrated to the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), where they set up a kingdom. The Vandals sacked North Africa in 430 and then Rome in 455. They dominated the region until Emperor Justinian reconquered most of the lost territory in 535. The Lombards then invaded Italy in 568 and took most of the country. What is most interesting is that all of these Germanic tribes were Christians, having been missionized decades earlier.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, England and Ireland had also become Christian. Ireland's version was heavily dominated by monasticism, as were parts of England, though they eventually came under the normal institutional style of bishops and dioceses. The first Scandinavian Christian king was Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, who converted in 950. In 955, the warrior Olaf Tryggvason, who had become enamored with Christianity during a raid on England, became king of Norway and began advancing Christianity in his realm. Sweden saw the development of Christianity through the ninth and tenth centuries. In contrast to what we saw in the Slavic lands, these conversions were far slower and more progressive.

### *Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire*

The list of famous emperors in the Roman Empire linked with Christianity is long and significant. Constantine is certainly the most important, as he provided imperial support for the expansion of the church. Theodosius made Christianity the sole religion of the empire, and Justinian advanced Christian culture and provided massive funds for the building of churches. Charlemagne ranks up among these figures as well.

While the West maintained modest fraternal relations with the political and ecclesiastical powers of the East, from the sixth century on it looked over the Alps to modern France and Germany for its future. Gaul (France) had been a Roman province since the time of Julius Caesar. In 481, Childeric I established himself as ruler. His son Clovis I (r. 481–511) united all of Gaul and adopted Christianity. He and his successors had good relationships with the bishop of Rome. For almost three centuries, the Merovingian dynasty flourished, but by the eighth century, the monarchy had been reduced to virtually ceremonial authority. "Nothing was left to the [Merovingian] king," wrote Charlemagne's biographer Einhard, "except to be happy with royal title and to sit on his throne with his flowing hair and long beard and to behave as if he had authority."[11]

Charles Martel (d. 741), founder of the Carolingian dynasty, was the "mayor of the palace," and it was under his leadership that the Muslim expansion from Spain into southern France was quelled. His son Pippin III succeeded his father in office. He was the functional ruler of the Franks. At that time, Pope Zacharias was being threatened by the Lombards, and he struck a deal with Pippin: he would support Pippin's public legitimacy as leader of the Franks for support in protecting Rome (and Ravena) from the Lombards. Pippin declared himself king of the Franks.

A depiction of the coronation of Charlemagne as the first Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, 800 CE.

When Pippin died in 768, his kingdom was divided between his two sons, Carlomen and Charles. Carlomen, however, died at the age of twenty, and Charles proclaimed himself king of all the Franks. He ruled as such until 814 and was called Charles the Great (Carolus Magnus) or Charlemagne. Charlemagne went on a conquering rampage, and his conquests were quick and many. Before he reached age fifty, he ruled over modern-day Belgium, Holland, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, northern Italy, Spain, Hungary, and part of Bohemia. The term *Europe* began to be used in writings of this period. Pope Hadrian even hailed him as the new Constantine.

In 799, Pope Leo III, who was experiencing a revolt in Rome, fled to Charlemagne, asking for him to intervene and secure his position as pope. Charlemagne entered Rome in 800 and held a council at which he declared Leo's rightful place as pope. At Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Christmas Day of that year, the returned Pope Leo crowned him *Imperator Romanorum* (Emperor of the Romans). This obviously did not sit well with the emperor in Constantinople, or with the Eastern Church, but they had to come to terms with it in some manner. Rome was placing its hopes on Europe, not Constantinople.

The Carolingian dynasty is as important as any European development in history; the "Dark Ages" was transformed. Charlemagne, along with the pope, strove to create a universal church in Europe, one of learning and revival. Charlemagne oversaw the unification of church laws and sacraments, and he carried out church reform. He also made his capital of Aachen the center of medieval scholarship.

## The Western Medieval Worldview

In the medieval world, life on earth was seen as a test, and earth itself as a place of waiting to enter one's true home in heaven. Christians believed that when they died their souls would be separated from their bodies and would come before God for individual judgment. At the end of the world, Jesus would return to raise the bodies of the dead and unite them with their souls. Those who had been faithful and good would be rewarded for all eternity in heaven, while the rest would be doomed to eternal punishment in hell.

The church was God's gift to this world to help Christians prepare for their final judgment. The church was founded by Jesus Christ, who had passed on leadership of the church to his chief apostle, Peter (Matthew 16:18). This apostolic succession was continued by the popes, who were seen as the direct successors of Peter, guaranteeing that the church would be divinely led. The pope was the Vicar of Christ, his spokesman and representative. While few imagined that all popes were good popes or even necessarily holy, they did believe in the system, one where God guided and protected the church. The grace of God was mediated by the church, particularly through its seven sacraments of baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, marriage, ordination, penance, and anointing of the sick. They were outward signs that conferred inward grace. Because **sacraments** could only be administered by ordained clergy, every Christian

**sacraments:** ritual symbols and actions that mediated God's grace

was dependent on the priests and bishops of the church, under the rule of the pope, to be in right relationship with God.

In the medieval world, the supernatural was taken for granted. The spiritual world that interpenetrated the material world was filled with angels, ghosts, saints, and demons. That supernatural activity happened regularly was unquestioned; the focus was on the origins of such activity. For example, demons and black magic could effect miracles (as could God, either alone or through saintly mediation). Various types of prayers (or incantations) were judged good or bad only when it was determined whether a saint or a demon caused something supernatural to occur in response. Still, miracles, remedies, and magic blurred in the minds of the laity and clergy alike. Of high importance in the medieval mind was the intervention of saints. As noted, from the early church on, saints were both examples of heroic faith as well as loci of spiritual power. The medieval church expanded on this tradition by building shrines to which pilgrims journeyed in order to venerate and seek divine intercession. The most popular and elaborate sites of pilgrimage were those associated

## RITUALS AND RITES: The Seven Sacraments

Both the Latin and Byzantine Churches practiced all seven sacraments, and still do. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, however, Protestant leaders challenged that many of these sacraments were not sufficiently biblically based or "instituted by Christ," and thus not formal sacraments. They retained only baptism and the Eucharist, though many communities continued to perform some of the other rites as important rituals, but not formal sacraments.

### Baptism

From the early church on, the sacrament that initiated one into the Christian community was baptism. One submerged into the waters as a kind of death to the old self, and then emerged into a new life of grace. Being baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and being anointed with oil, was seen as *christifying* the initiate, allowing him or her to take on the royal, prophetic, and priestly dignity of Christ. Baptism erased original sin and made the baptized a child of God.

### Confirmation

The history of confirmation is clouded. It appears that the church in the patristic era held an additional rite during the time of baptism as a kind of sealing from the Holy Spirit. This required the ministry of the bishop rather than presbyters (priests), who typically presided over smaller local communities. In the modern period, confirmation became something of an adult rite of passage, whereby teenagers publicly declare for themselves the faith claimed by their parents during infant baptism. Here, they receive additional graces of the Holy Spirit to strengthen their faith.

### The Eucharist

As Christ identified himself with the bread and wine at the Last Supper, Christians celebrated the Eucharist as a way to commune with the risen Christ. Christ initiated this sacred meal "in remembrance of me" as a sign of the new covenant in his blood. Christians believe they are partaking of the body

with Mary, the Blessed Mother. Journeys to such sites tended to be pure acts of devotion. Other saints' shrines were more local affairs, and saintly favors were hoped for, and often expected.

## Just War and the Crusades

As noted earlier, the most influential theologian in the West was Augustine of Hippo. It was Augustine who developed the theology of original sin and the impossibility of faith without God's grace preceding any act of the will. In Augustine's celebrated book *The City of God*, he challenged whether the state, or any human institution, could be anything other than part of the "city of man," filled with sins such as pride or disordered desires. Given then, one issue on Augustine's mind was whether a state could legitimately act violently. It is not obvious that **pacifism** is the greatest moral choice. Most morally minded people think that it is often necessary to use force to

**pacifism:** the moral commitment to refrain from any violence, regardless of the political or social situation

and blood of Jesus, some literally and others spiritually or only symbolically.

### Marriage

In the medieval period, marriage was transformed from merely a social convention into a sacrament. The union symbolized the nuptial relationship Christ, the groom, has with his church, the bride. It was also understood as uniting the couple to the grace of Christ.

### Holy Orders

As mentioned, Christian communities created a threefold hierarchical order of leadership: deacon, presbyter, and bishop. The bishop was understood as a successor of the apostles. Presbyters, who came to be known as priests when representing the bishop's authority to local communities, shared the hierarchical priesthood of the bishop and thus could preside at the church's sacraments. Deacons exercised their ministry in the form of service to the church. All three ordinations were considered permanent. In the West by the late Middle Ages, priests and bishops were required to vow celibacy as a condition of ordination.

### Penance (Confession)

The patristic church's practice for those who committed serious sin was to become part of the Order of Penitents, where they did penance and refrained from communion until the bishop deemed they had sufficiently repented and reformed. This practice morphed into a sacrament whereby all Christians were to confess their sins, even the most minor, to their priest and receive a particular penance. In the name of God, the priest would then absolve them from their sins.

### Anointing of the Sick

In cases of serious illness, a priest would be called to anoint the Christian with oil in hopes of mediating God's grace to heal that person. Typically, the sick person was imagined to be near death. Thus, it was also known as *extreme unction* (anointing in an extreme case).

prevent leaders, foreign or otherwise, from brutalizing and enslaving whole peoples. Do innocent sufferers not have justice claims?

Augustine was the first articulator of the Christian conditions for war. Briefly, his conditions are as follows: (1) the war has to have a just cause, typically one of self-defense; (2) the war has to be motivated only by justice; (3) the war has to be waged by a legitimate political authority; (4) the war has to be conducted justly; and (5) the war has to be the last resort.

Most wars in the history of Christian nations have failed to satisfy all of the just war criteria—and sometimes have met none of them. As we have seen, Christian Goths invaded Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, Christian Vandals attacked North Africa and destroyed cities, and Christian Lombards invaded and took over much of Italy. Ironically, in all three cases, Christians were attacking Christians, and for no other reason than to conquer and rule.

The most notorious expression of medieval Christian violence is the Crusades, in which Western kings, knights, and volunteer soldiers attacked enemies, both political and religious. There were really hundreds of crusades, from Spain to the Baltics to Palestine, all of which involved the same vows, privileges, and responsibilities. The most infamous were those that invaded parts of Byzantium and the Middle East, four of which are particularly notable. The first crusade (1095–1099) was the most militarily successful. Pope Urban II, responding to a plea from Constantinople, sent troops to recapture the Holy Land. Crusaders captured Edessa and Antioch in 1098 and Jerusalem in 1099. They did not restore these lands to the Byzantines, however, but created the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Crusaders' behavior in conquering these lands was abysmal, systematically slaughtering virtually every inhabitant. When Edessa fell back under Muslim rule in 1144, Pope Eugene III called for a second crusade (1145–1149). This time, Crusaders looted cities along the way, even in the Byzantine Empire. The Egyptian sultan Saladin's capture of Jerusalem in 1187 sparked the failed third crusade. The fourth crusade (1201–1204) was the oddest and most

This fourteenth-century manuscript painting depicts the Crusades at the gates of Jerusalem.

disastrous for relations between the Eastern and Western churches. Pope Innocent III called for this crusade, but the Crusaders never even made it to the Holy Land. Rather, the soldiers, short on money and personnel, decided to sack Constantinople instead and set up a Latin Empire based there. The Latin Empire continued for the next five decades, but fell when Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus recaptured Constantinople. Ultimately, the Byzantine Empire endured until 1453, when it was taken by the Turkish Ottoman Empire, but by the thirteenth century, it was an empire only in name.

The Christian history of just war, with its insistence on necessarily meeting all the five criteria, still strikes modern ears as fairly reasonable. It virtually matches Islamic codes of just war. Most see a need to protect peoples against grave injustice, even if this involves violence. However, the claim of just war was applied by countries and the church itself in ways that would have never satisfied the strict criteria for war established by this tradition. Of particular historical tragedy were, as mentioned, the Crusades, which closed any hope of reconciliation between East and West and created animosity between Christians and Muslims that is still felt today.

# Christianity and Modernity (1517–1962)

## Transformations from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

When ought one to distinguish the medieval world from the modern one? One typical way is to break up Western history into smaller segments: Early Middle Ages, High Middle Ages, Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Modern World. While these are useful categories, there is an arbitrary quality to it all. Cultures morph variously and in fits and starts. There are markers, however, that bring us to the eras just mentioned.

One such marker was the rise of the universities in the Late Middle Ages. Between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, Europe had enjoyed a period of relative peace, good harvests, flourishing trade, and the emergence of cities with wealth. Collectively, this conditioned the possibility for great centers of learning. Scholarship had been reconfigured to a scholastic system. One first studied logic, grammar, and rhetoric; this was the *trivium* (three ways). After this came the *quadrivium,* or four disciplines of arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music. Finally, those who mastered these areas could go on to specialize in theology, law, or medicine.

Early Christian scholarship had often been scholarship of occasion; that is, Christian thinkers wrote to weigh in on theological disputes. To the question of dogmas, Augustine wrote *The Trinity*, and regarding the challenge that Christianity was causing the collapse of the Roman Empire, he wrote *The City of God.* But by the High Middle Ages, scholarship had changed. The agenda now was to understand all the Christian faith in a reasoned and systematic way. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is usually noted as the greatest scholastic philosopher/theologian of the period.

**nominalism:** belief that there are no actual universals, thus separating the divine reality from human realities

One of the great scholastic debates of the time focused on whether universals exist as something real and independent of human minds or as useful ideas but nothing more. Aquinas, for example, believed that goodness exists in God as an absolute value and in humans as a relative value. Others thought that universals such as goodness, beauty, and truth were merely concepts. Such scholars were called *nominalists*, because they maintained universals exist in *name* only. **Nominalism** implies that there is a categorical difference between our knowledge of the natural world and the reality of the supernatural world. If so, the implication would forge a chasm between heaven and earth, faith and reason. Nominalists argued that God is not constrained by human ideas of goodness or justice but is completely free. In this view, what we know about God is limited to revelation. Thus, given nominalism, human ideas of morality or truth are, from God's perspective, just as flawed as any human creation. The same could be said of church structure or even church doctrines, at least those not based exclusively on biblical revelation. (Separating faith from reason would become a clarion call of the Protestant Reformation.)

Europe's transformation into the Renaissance likewise has markers. One marker was the West's increased experience of Byzantine and Muslim scholarship, particularly regarding Greek classics. Another marker was the burgeoning middle class of merchants, whose demand for education inspired initiatives to make learning accessible and books available. No innovation spurred on the Renaissance more than the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1440. It is estimated that 6 million books were printed between 1450 and 1500—more than were produced over the previous 1,000 years, and at far less cost. Cultural developments also corresponded to centralized power. During the Renaissance, powerful monarchs began to control larger regions, particularly in Spain, France, and England.

**humanism:** Renaissance celebration of the individual

Historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) argued that the Renaissance created *individuals*—that is, people began to see themselves less as a part of a static medieval world where community expectations dominated, and more as those who could excel on their own merits. A corollary to this new emphasis on the individual was the advance of **humanism**. Today, this term tends to refer to secularism, but originally, it was the celebration of human dignity and flourishing. In the Middle Ages, the model Christian was St. Francis of Assisi, whose lowliness, love of poverty, and obedience reflected his solicitude to God. In contrast, the Renaissance world celebrated the explorer, the artist, and the man of arts and letters.

## The Protestant Reformation

### *Luther*

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was an Augustinian monk and young professor of biblical studies at the University of Wittenberg. During his first years of teaching, he was troubled. He exceeded his contemporaries in religious practice, and even went to confession daily, but this brought him little peace. The church taught that humans were

justified by God's grace alone, but also taught that humans had to choose whether to accept that grace or reject it. And further, salvation required that one lead a fully engaged faith. Without actively living an authentic Christian life, including obedience to the church and participation in the sacraments, one could lose that justification. The dictum of the day was this: *God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them.*

Luther's great question was: How could you ever know if you did enough that was within you? His response to the issue was not simply that we are justified by grace through faith—everyone thought this. Rather, his innovation was to see that justification and subsequent salvation were disconnected from what Christians did. Their use of personal agency or free will is disconnected to salvation. Even faith itself was not an act of the will; it was the soul's compelled response to having been saved. We are justified *irresistibly*. God's grace literally takes over and transforms the soul without the soul's ability to resist. Does this make God a divine bully? Hardly, in Luther's view. Rather, God frees humans from their slavery to sin and gives them the freedom of God's children. The implication of Luther's theological position is that nothing the soul does contributes to or affects one's salvation. This includes obedience to the church or engagement of the sacraments. Luther was actually quite solicitous to his Catholic tradition. But teaching that humans had nothing to do with the saved state of their soul was revolutionary.

Portrait of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach. Luther, once an Augustinian monk, became the first major reform figure in the Protestant Reformation.

In addition to these theological positions, Luther was highly critical of the Catholic Church's use of **indulgences**. The theory of indulgences has a long and semi-sordid history. From the time of the early church, many church fathers believed that their souls would have to go through some kind of purification before entering heaven. It came to be seen as a kind of corporeal punishment for sins. But the prayers and merits of Christ and the saints could be used to shorten the time or severity of this purgation. The medieval church taught that such merits were at the pope's disposal, and that he could provide an *indulgence* that reduced or eliminated the "satisfaction" due in purgatory.

**indulgences:** the papacy's claimed power to remit penalty or "satisfaction" to God regarding one's sins

Typically, penances were some form of prayer, fasting, or almsgiving, three traditional means of renewal. Alms could be given to the poor or to the church. With the possibility of "alms for the church," however, the potential for corruption and abuse is immediately apparent: Indulgences became a fundraising tool! In 1517, for example, Pope Leo X authorized Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz to sell indulgences throughout northern Germany, the proceeds of which would help finance the rebuilding of St. Peter's Basilica.

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

—Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1955–1986, 32:112–113

On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses (statements) challenging indulgences and purgatory to the door of the Wittenberg Castle. It was also a call for a public debate, which eventually led to the Leipzig Debate in 1519. The transcripts of that debate were then sent to theological faculties of Louvain and Cologne, which condemned Luther. A papal bull was soon issued that demanded Luther recant or be excommunicated. He had sixty days to decide but hardly needed them: He publicly burned the papal bull, and the Protestant Reformation began. Luther, with the support of many German princes, separated from the Catholic Church.

By 1555, with the **Peace of Augsburg**, each prince in Germany was to choose between the Lutheran or Catholic alignment, and all the citizens within a prince's realm would have to either embrace their prince's faith or emigrate to other lands. Southern Germany remained widely Catholic, while northern Germany adopted Lutheranism. Followers of Luther took his message that works were entirely disconnected from salvation to heart. In Wittenberg, church attendance and tithes fell off markedly. Over the next couple of centuries, Lutheran pastors increasingly preached sermons about hell to urge their members to obey the disciplines of the Lutheran Church.

**Peace of Augsburg:** decision by German princes and the Holy Roman Emperor that Christians would follow their prince's religious convictions as either Roman Catholic or Lutheran

### *Calvin and Zwingli*

Switzerland also had a reformation. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss priest, came to Zurich to be the main preacher at the largest church in the city. He had become convinced that Christian belief and practice ought to be based on scripture alone, rather than conditioned by church tradition. He actively preached against many aspects of traditional Catholicism, including veneration of the saints and sacraments of the church. Zurich Christians removed all religious imagery, which they considered idols, and the city council replaced the Eucharist with a liturgy largely created by Zwingli himself.

Along with Luther and Zwingli, John Calvin (1509–1564) stands as a central early reformer. Ultimately centering his reform in Geneva, Calvin created a more democratic church structure. His system of church government involved presbyteries and synods made up of lay people rather than bishops. The city of Geneva itself represented a church/state democracy, being run by twelve members: four elected city officials, four pastors, and four lay elders. In many ways, the Geneva reform was extreme. It instituted laws severely restricting public speech, social prohibitions such as dancing, and even restrictions on names that could be given to children.

**double predestination:** Calvin's view that from eternity God had predestined those who would be saved and those who would be damned

Calvin's most provocative teachings had to do with the nature of the person before God and the dynamics of God's salvation, including his doctrine known as **double predestination**, whereby from eternity God chose who the elect would be and who the damned would be. Those God elected for heaven were given grace, and those damned were not. This claim begs several questions. Is God then unjust in damning persons who have no ability to be saved? What is one's motivation to be good if it is already decided? Finally, can one know whether one is among the saved and, if so, how? Calvin's answer

to the first question was that everyone is corrupt. Thus, God shows his mercy by electing some for heaven and giving them his grace. In turn, God shows his justice by damning the corrupt. To the second question, Calvin's answer was no one should ever do any good as a self-motive. The truly elect understand that a moral life simply reflects life in the Spirit. And how might one know if one is saved? Calvin taught that one can obtain confidence through the evidence of one's new life in the Spirit. Calvin's writings frequently describe a saved Christian's palpable knowledge of God's indwelling in that person's soul—that is, a dramatically felt experience of God's presence.

Calvinism soon developed what are sometimes referred to as the five points of Calvinism and are collectively given the acronym **TULIP**, for **T**otal depravity of the soul, **U**nconditional election, **L**imited atonement, **I**rresistible grace, and **P**erseverance of the saints. In short, souls are utterly sinful and spiritually dead; God's election of a soul (to heaven or to hell) is from eternity; Christ died only for the elect; grace effects election without the will's engagement; and if one is elected, then one will persevere in faith—that is, once saved, always saved.

**TULIP:** representing the five points of Calvinism, standing for total depravity of the soul, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints

### *Anabaptists*

While the Lutherans and Calvinists dominated European Protestantism, there were also Christians who challenged them. These are the radical reformers, whom Zwingli called *Anabaptists* (re-baptizers), who insisted that only adults could be baptized and that infant baptism was invalid. The name stuck, even among the radical reformers. Their movement was based on four basic principles: (1) believer's baptism, in which only adults who willingly embrace Christianity can be baptized; (2) restorationalism, in which true Christians must return to the faith and the life of the primitive church; (3) separatism, according to which these Christians are the righteous remnant; and (4) pessimism, the belief that the world cannot be trusted.

While the later history of Anabaptists is filled with peaceable Christians, such as Mennonites and the Amish, that was certainly not the case in the early Reformation period. In 1530, Melchior Hoffman preached that God chose Strasbourg as the New Jerusalem and demanded the overthrow of the city's authorities. In 1534, Hoffman's followers took over the city of Münster and demanded that everyone remaining in the city either be re-baptized or face execution. In response, Zurich made it a law that whoever did get re-baptized would also face execution.

### *The Anglican Reformation and the Puritan Revolt*

The English Reformation was initiated by the state rather than by Christians in the churches. English monarchs initially championed Catholicism over Protestantism, denouncing Protestant views as heretical. Pope Leo X even conferred the title "Defender of the Faith" to King Henry VIII. Problems arose, however, when Henry, who had no male heir to the throne, wanted to divorce his first wife and remarry in hopes of fathering a son. Pope Clement VII refused to annul his first marriage, and Henry responded by creating a national church—the Church of England—with

himself as the head. But apart from breaking with the papacy and taking over monastic properties as now the property of the king, Henry continued to oppose other Protestants. Only after Henry's death were Protestant reformers safe in England.

As Protestants made inroads into Britain, the Church of England's doctrine did not seem pure enough for some, who sought to *purify* the faith from anything particularly Catholic. These were the Puritans. The course of England would be rocky until Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1606) created something of a compromise religious structure. But Puritanism would later go on to rise, briefly rule, and ultimately be persecuted again. It also fragmented into Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Separatists, and Nonconformists, including Baptists. Ultimately, over 40,000 Puritan pilgrims would flee England for North America, bring to the new colonies their propensity for sectarian diversity.

## The Catholic Reformation

The Catholic Church responded to the Reformation with its own initiative to reform. While there had been reform movements prior to this, they never showed much effort at real change. But between 1545 and 1563, Catholicism held the Council of Trent, a decidedly reforming council. Trent made reforms in liturgy, the demand for better and consistent formation of priests, and demands for bishops to have greater accountability. It was also something of a "counter-reformation" that posed itself in opposition to the Protestant cause. While Protestants *demoted* many sacraments, Catholicism insisted that there were seven. While Protestants claimed that veneration of the saints was functionally heretical, Catholicism assured its faithful that these were pious acts, though not to replace focus on Christ. While Protestants moved to translate scriptures and the rites of the church into various mother tongues, Catholicism insisted that Latin had to be used, including the Latin translation of the Bible. The Catholic Reformation was, for the most part, a success story for Catholicism, and real reforms came into place. The cost, however, was a deepening divide between itself and Protestant Christianity.

The Reformation led not only to political divisions but even to open warfare between Catholics and Protestants. Like Catholics, Protestants assumed that the goal of Christianity was a Christian civilization. For the most part, however, neither side considered the other to be authentically Christian. Consequently, Christians resorted to warfare to settle whose religion would shape public order. The *Thirty Years War* engulfed most of Europe, but was brought to a conclusion with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Map 4.2).

The Protestant Reformation led not to a new sense of unity, but to a chaotic diversity. In medieval Catholicism and the early sectarian movements of Protestantism, each group had seen itself as the sole repository of truth, to which all in society should conform. Through the next two centuries, however, denominational religions progressively accepted the establishment of religiously diverse communities.

Map 4.2 Europe after the Peace of Westphalia.

It is with the emergence of denominationalism that Christianity set itself to a new relationship with the public and political order of society. The state as a secular and neutral political institution that favored no one religion emerged as the normative model for the modern world. The United States led the way, becoming the first nation to officially separate church and state. Paradoxically, this development continued to coexist with the assumption by many Christians that the task of Christianity was to Christianize the world. Consequently, as Europe's public order was becoming increasingly secular, European Christians were setting out to missionize other countries. This was in concert with Western colonialism's political and economic attempts at global conquest.

## The Enlightenment

*The Enlightenment* is a term often used to describe the transition from the Renaissance to the modern period. It emerged on various fronts, most notably from philosophical discourse and the development of the scientific method. Scientific discoveries and an increasingly rigorous and independent-minded scientific community paved the way for this shift. The Enlightenment's cultural ethos presented a core set of values that eventually challenged traditional institutions while vesting extraordinary faith in rationality, science, and progress. Hierarchies, rationally unsupported authority, and beliefs without evidential warrant all became suspect. This was the *age of reason.* It was also an age of great faith in humanity. Christianity is premised on the belief that there is something deeply corrupt in the state of the soul; most Enlightenment thinkers disagreed, arguing that humans are naturally good. If they act immorally, it is because they are ignorant or bound by political and/or religious tyrannies. Enlightenment confidence in the power of reason and human progress imagined a future of widespread education, the dismissal of religion, and scientific advances that would progressively move toward the perfection of humanity.

Many early Enlightenment figures understood their scientific inquiries to be consonant with Christian faith. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), for example, drew theological associations with mathematical and astronomical observations. Kepler thought that there were five other spheres revolving around the sun, for a total of six planets in the solar system. This, for him, pointed to the glory of God, who was represented by the sun with six spheres revolving around it, just like the perfect biblical number seven. Kepler also saw the Trinity reflected in the sun (Father), fixed planets (Son), and intermediate space (Holy Spirit).

Isaac Newton (1642–1727) framed science as the universal scope of knowledge and then argued for God as the foundation of the mechanical universe. For him, God drew up nature's laws and eternally grounded them in intelligence and power. Like Thomas Aquinas, Newton advocated postulating causes from effects. That is, he recognized the lawfulness of the universe, its unity, predictability, and intelligibility—indeed, its very existence—and concluded that it implied God and reflected God's glory.

Other Enlightenment thinkers, however, believed that the universe was dynamic, and that movement was intrinsically part of matter. As modern scholar Michael Buckley observed, "No one needed a god to give the first impetus to matter. It is there already and had been there forever; motion and matter are inseparable."[12]

### *Rationalism*

Enlightenment figures challenged the very foundations by which Christian theologians built their theological edifices. They argued that reason, not revelation, ought to secure knowledge. This position is known as **rationalism**. Rationalism even became used among Christians. The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that the existence of God was necessary for both morality and free will. But his work is overwhelmingly concerned with how one knows things and what kinds of demands religion ought to make. In his 1781 book *Critique of Pure Reason*, he outlines structures for knowing in the human mind and the difference between what can be known directly but only partially (*phenomenal*) and what cannot be known directly (*noumenal*). He also outlines his moral framework based on reason alone.

**rationalism:** the philosophical position that knowledge can only be secured by evidence

### *Empiricism*

The search for how one comes to know something took a turn with the development of **empiricism**; that is, knowledge can only be secured by experience. English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) argued that human minds were a kind of blank slate (*tabula rasa*) at birth and subsequently came to know things by experience. Revelation that was not based on direct experience could not be certain. Locke was a Christian, and he believed that Christianity could successfully be argued as the most reasonable religion. But he also believed that revelatory claims were at best probable.

**empiricism:** the philosophical position that knowledge can only be secured by experience

## Colonialism

While European Christians wrestled with the beginnings of what would become a full-blown secular outlook, they took to colonizing the world and bringing the Gospel with them. Portugal's Prince Henry "the Navigator" explored Western Africa, expanding trade there. His small colonies set the conditions for African trade and the beginnings of the slave trade. Other Christian nations followed suit. In 1634, the French created a colony on the Ivory Coast and supported missions there. English clergymen were commissioned at the request of the royal African Company in the Gold Coast. And the Danes created a fort at Christianborg in today's Accra, Ghana.

In the Americas, Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors set up colonies that dominated and controlled the natives. In Brazil, Portuguese traders soon began enslaving natives to work on sugar plantations. They also imported African slaves. According to the **royal patronage** system, both Spain and Portugal financed missions and set

**royal patronage:** system where the papacy allowed Spain and Portugal to control missionary activities and the establishment of churches and dioceses

up dioceses in their newly conquered lands. Their motto was *God, glory, and gold.* The order was really reversed, however; wealth was the key interest. Consider, for example, Francisco Pizarro's conquest of Peru in 1532. Surrounded by 80,000 Incan warriors, Pizarro's 168 soldiers captured their king Atahualpa and held him prisoner for eight months. Pizarro extracted a ransom of enough gold to fill a room twenty-two feet long by seventeen feet wide, with the height of eight feet. Ultimately, after he sent the ransom back to Spain, he reneged on his promise and killed Atahualpa.

There were moral voices challenging the reckless abuse of the natives. Pope Paul III issued the bull *Sublimis Deus* in 1537 that set forth the rights of the natives of the Americas and challenged their forced enslavement. In 1542, King Charles V of Spain also passed the "New Laws of the Indies," limiting the power of Spanish settlers over the natives. The Spanish colonists paid little attention, however. And eventually, the papacy rescinded the royal patronage system and insisted that native priests be employed as soon as possible, and that native cultures be treated with respect. This is not to say that life in the Americas was easy for most natives prior

Not all Christian houses of worship in America have that New England look. This adobe mission church is in Taos, New Mexico.

to the conquest, or that they themselves had been free from warfare, slavery, and the like. But the sheer size of the conquest is daunting. And Christian missionaries were oddly rather successful in making new converts; millions of native Indians from Mexico to Cape Horn became Christian. It should be obvious, however, that the conversions of many of these peoples came at a staggering price of mass exploitation.

Christian missionary interests also took Europeans to Asia. Along with German Lutherans and Dutch Protestants, Catholic Jesuit missionaries came to various parts of India to lead missions. Jesuit missionaries also entered Japan in 1549, and within a half century, they had established 200 missions and church schools. The "Christian century" ended when Japan united under the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Tokugawa regime expelled foreign missionaries, and between 1627 and 1636, up to 6,000 Christians were martyred. Jesuit missionaries also traveled to China and strove to unite the Catholic faith with the Chinese culture of the day. They were rather successful until Emperor Yung-Cheng issued the Edict of Expulsion and Confiscation. Some 300,000 Chinese Christians were affected, and churches were either destroyed or converted to public buildings. Both Japanese and Chinese leaders were right to be suspicious. They saw in the Europeans a colonial interest as well as a religious one. The Chinese emperor's fears were much later legitimated when the British East India Trading company demanded that China open up its ports in the nineteenth century, sparking the so-called Opium Wars.

Christian missionaries tended to resist the cultures they came to evangelize. Typically, they shared with the rest of European culture a sense of superiority. Thus, colonization was imagined to be an attempt at "civilizing" the natives. Missionaries had a difficult time distinguishing Western culture from Christianity. The Spanish imported Spanish culture along with a faith in Christ. The British imported their culture wherever they went, and Christian faith looked, well, *British*. Obviously, if Christianity is a universal religion, it ought to thrive in various cultures, not just modern Europe's. But the issue is also rather complex. May Chinese Christians practice ancestor veneration, whereby some ancestors were hardly distinct from deities? Ought Indian Christians continue the caste system when Christ made all equal? What about polygamy? Would this be acceptable for the Christian faith? And so on.

# Postmodern Trends (1962–Present)

## Leaving Behind Eurocentrism

In 1900, eight of the ten most populous nations of Christians were European: Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Russia, Poland, and Ukraine. One hundred years later, only two would make that list—Italy and Germany—with Italy's association being mainly cultural. Even as many Europeans still self-identify

as Christian, church attendance is typically around 10 percent of the populace. Additionally, cultural knowledge of the basic doctrines of Christianity, particularly among the young, has diminished profoundly. Europe is fundamentally a secularized culture.

In the 1950s, the number of Christians in the United States belonging to traditional Protestant denominations surged, and a Gallup poll at that time showed that 96 percent remained in those denominations where they were raised. By 1990, all of these memberships had dropped by around a quarter of their members, while the country's overall population surged. Currently, Pentecostal churches are growing, and Evangelical churches are holding their own, but mainstream Protestantism is shrinking. Catholicism is slowly shrinking, and would be shrinking dramatically so without Mexican and Central American immigration. The greatest growth in religious identification in the United States is what sociologists are calling the *nones*. These are persons who do not identify as atheists or agnostics, but also refuse to identify as specifically religious.

Although Christianity is anemic in Europe and struggling in the United States, it is flourishing elsewhere. Today, at least in terms of numbers, Christianity is predominantly a religion of the Southern Hemisphere, where the majority of Christians reside. Since the second half of the twentieth century, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches have surged in Central and South America. Their appeal is a simpler faith of the heart and a style of emotional worship that seems to suit the cultural temperament. The recent success of these two forms of Christianity is also due to the shortage of priests to serve the Catholic population. Many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches do not require much formal training of their leaders. Their ready ministry to small church communities has proven appealing. The spirituality of Pentecostal Christianity, with its understanding of a highly active supernatural world and its emphasis on prosperity preaching, appeals to many in South America.

## Africa and Asia

**African Initiated Churches:** churches in Africa that left behind Protestant affiliations and developed a hybrid of traditional African beliefs and Pentecostalism

In 1900, there were 7 million Christians in Africa, making up 5 percent of the total population. Today, there are 400 million Christians there, or about 53 percent of the total population. Christianity is now a majority religion in most countries in Africa, particularly south of the Sahara. One of the most interesting developments in the last seventy years is the rise of **African Initiated Churches** (AIC). Both Catholic and Protestant Christians sent missions to Africa, where we now find Lutheran, Dutch Reform, Anglican, Methodist, and Roman Catholic communities. As noted earlier, one of the problems European missions faced was their implicit assumption that to be Christian is to act and think like a European. Some African Christians responded by developing their own forms of worship and even theological sensibilities. AICs are the strongest in Kenya, Congo, Zimbabwe, and southern Africa. Many

In Africa and everywhere around the world, entry into the Christian faith is through the ritual of baptism, as shown here in Mozambique.

are "prophet-healing" churches in the Pentecostal form. One finds in these churches a union of traditional African beliefs and Pentecostalism.

Christianity is also thoroughly grounded in South Korea, to the point that the country's last four presidents have been Christian. Unlike Japan and China, which viewed Christianity as a foreign import connected to Western imperialism, Korea experienced Christianity as an institution that supported nationalism. Christians played an active role in winning Korean independence from Japan and developed relief programs following the Korean War. Korean Christianity is flourishing so well that it sends out missions to other countries. In 1979, Korean churches sent 93 missionaries overseas. In 1990, that number was over 1,600. By 2000, they were sending 6,000 missionaries around the world.

## Other Postmodern Trends

One of the greatest trends in postmodern Christianity is the effort to address the disparity between the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and the status of many people in the world and in the church. Theologians working in the context of massive institutional poverty, sexism, and racism have responded by creating ways of engaging the Gospel to explicitly reveal the problems of marginalization and posit the possibilities for countering them.

### *Liberation Theology*

According to the World Bank, 25,000 children die of starvation each day, and hundreds of millions live on less than one dollar a day. Liberation theologians ask: Is justice served by merely encouraging the rich to be more charitable to the poor and the poor to accept their dismal circumstances? Is the kingdom of God now reduced to "going to heaven," with no relevance to issues of human dignity? Liberation theology seeks to expose structural sin in society—that is, economic or cultural structures that inherently abuse, manipulate, or exploit others. Initially, liberation theology was a Roman Catholic initiative. Today, however, it has widened to include mainstream Protestants.

### *Feminist Theology*

The cultural critique of Latin American and African liberation theology has an analogue in the feminist ecclesiastical critique of patriarchy. The church, along with essentially every other historical institution, has traditionally been patriarchal. The feminist movement of the 1960s voiced a large-scale critique of Western culture's systematic marginalization of women, from restrictions on reproductive control to a lack of equal rights in the workplace.

Women's full leadership in the church had its first expression in the Salvation Army, which when constituted in 1878 had forty-one female and forty-nine male officers. In 1974, eleven women in Philadelphia were ordained by the Episcopal Church, the American expression of the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church in England declared these ordinations to be both "irregular" (illegal) and "invalid" (sacramental non-events). Today, about half of the ordinations in the Episcopal Church are for women, and both legal and valid. In 2015, the Anglican Church in England ordained Reverend Libby Lane as a bishop. In doing so, it joined other churches that ordain women, including the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and United Church of Christ churches. Other Christian denominations have held out, including the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Southern Baptist, and Wisconsin and Missouri Synod Lutheran Churches.

A civil rights activist who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Barbara Harris was ordained a bishop in the Episcopal Church in 1980.

A corollary to this movement is that of gay men and lesbian women who demand equal rights. In 2004, the United Church of Christ began allowing same-sex unions. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Presbyterian Church (USA) followed. Currently, the United Methodist Church is working to divide their denomination on this issue. All of these denominations now also allow those in same-sex unions to be ordained. The Episcopal Church also ordains priests in same-sex union, which has caused a divide in the United States and consternation throughout the Anglican Communion.

### *Black Theology*

Black theology arose from the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr., the foremost leader of the movement and a Baptist minister, saw civil rights

## From Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all God's children. It would be a mistake for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. . . . [W]e are not satisfied nor will we be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. . . . I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even in the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . . I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have a Dream" *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 2013, accessed at http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/sns-mlk-ihaveadream,0,36081.story

as a religious imperative. In his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King identifies the civil rights movement as one following the prophets of the Old Testament in their religious quest against injustice. For him and many others, this was a holy work of justice, and God's judgment would be upon the church if it failed to address this curse. While there are many forms of sin, both personal and institutional, black theology uses the category of racism as its lens. It works from the presupposition that African Americans are those most marginalized in the United States, and it looks to the Bible and other theological resources to challenge this sin.

## Conclusion: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism

The difference between a fundamentalist and a postmodern way of embracing the Christian faith is extraordinary. As we noted in Chapter 1, modernity tends to see religion as a personal expression of choice, something distinct from and even divorced from public life. Here, religion is a private matter. We also noted that neither fundamentalist nor postmodern faith sees it that way. For both, faith ought to be integrated

"We are under attack by Muslims at home and abroad. We should stop all immigration of Muslims to the U.S. until this threat with Islam has been settled. Every Muslim that comes into this country has the potential to be radicalized—and they do their killing to honor their religion and Muhammad."

—Franklin Graham https://www.afa.net/the-stand/culture/2015/07/franklin-graham-on-islamic-immigration/

into public life. Both forms, however, see that integration very differently, though the issue is actually the same: How ought Christianity come to terms with global pluralism?

Fundamentalism tends to imagine something of a medieval view of a singular society, all rallying around shared values and agreed-upon moral norms. For example, if abortion is intrinsically wrong, then it is wrong for everyone, and no one should be exempt. If same-sex relationships are opposed to God's law, then prohibiting them ought to be the law of the land. Here, "pluralism" simply does not apply or make a difference. There is right, and there is wrong. This dynamic propels fundamentalist Christians to be highly active in American "culture wars," where they are particularly focused on challenging science and exploiting fears of the "religious other."

In contrast, postmodern, postcolonial Christianity affirms a pluralistic world where Christianity exists as just one particular witness among others. Additionally, postmodern Christians look for dialogue with other expressions of religious and secular insights, to influence and be influenced by them. As both forms of Christian expression seek a compassionate and just social order, they understand this very differently. Postmodern Christianity celebrates diversity, while fundamentalist Christianity understands diversity as little more than moral and religious compromise.

## Discussion Questions

1. According to the chapter, Jesus did not have a specific political, social, or even religious manifesto in mind with his mission. Given this, what did Jesus mean by the "kingdom of God," and how did he express this?
2. According to the chapter, Jesus did not intend to start a new religion but to fulfill the Jewish faith in a wholly Jewish manner. Given this, do you think that Christianity failed in some way by becoming a new religion? Explain.
3. Progressively, Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. What were the trade-offs of this union?
4. What issues were resolved by the doctrine of Jesus's human and divine natures and the Trinitarian nature of God? Do these doctrines put Christianity into fundamental disagreement with Judaism and Islam regarding monotheism?
5. Christianity developed a just war tradition. Do you think Christianity should weigh in on mass violence, even at times promoting it for a higher just cause? Explain.
6. Both Luther and Calvin taught that Christians do not play an active role in being justified. Why did they believe this? Is it compelling to you? Explain.

7. How did Luther's understanding of Christianity differ from that of the medieval church? What was the political and religious significance of this difference?
8. How did Western colonialism contribute to the emergence of a post-European or postcolonial Christianity? Define and explain.
9. What issues separate premodern from modern and postmodern Christianity, and how do they illustrate the fundamentalist–modernist debate?

## Key Terms

abbot
African Initiated Churches
anchoritic monasticism
apologist
apostles
baptism
Caesaro-papism
canon
coenobitic monasticism
confessor
consecrated virginity
Constantine
Council of Jerusalem
creed
doctrine
dogma
double predestination
ecumenical councils
empiricism
Eucharist
fundamentalists
Gnosticism
grace
humanism
indulgences
justification
kerygma
kingdom of God
liberal Protestantism
martyr
modernists
monotheism
nominalism
Order of Penitents
original sin
pacifism
patriarchal sees
patristic period
Peace of Augsburg
rationalism
royal patronage
Rule of Benedict
sacraments
sacrificial atonement
Son of David
Son of Man
Trinity
TULIP

## Suggested Readings

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## Additional Resources

*From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*. This four-hour PBS video series traces Christianity from Jesus to Constantine. The entire series can be watched online at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/watch/. Includes timelines, study guides, etc.
*A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, by Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch. DVD available from PBS. Episode 1: The First Christianity; Episode 2: Catholicism: The Unpredictable Rise of Rome; Episode 3: Orthodoxy: From Empire to Empire; Episode 4: Reformation: The Individual Before God; Episode 5: Protestantism: The Evangelical Explosion; Episode 6: God in the Dock.
*The Longest Hatred*. A documentary on anti-Semitism in Christianity and Islam. Two videos, total of 150 minutes (Copyright Thames Television 1993 and WGBH Boston 1993).

## Notes

1. For this chapter, I am drawing on previous work. See Peter Feldmeier, *The Christian Tradition: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
2. The Latin text and English translation are from B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh 1881), 540–542.
3. See Michael Holmes, trans. and ed, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), Ephesians, no. 4; Magnesians, no. 6–7; Philadelphians, no. 4.
4. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV.17.5–18.5, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, rev. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), pp. 484–486.
5. Philadelphians, no. 4, p. 118; Smyrnaeans, no. 6, p. 123; Ephesians, no. 20, in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 102.
6. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.40.3, in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. and trans. William Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 141; Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 66, in Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 185.

7. Quoted in Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 7.
8. Quoted in Brown, p. 41.
9. Quoted in Robert Wilken, *First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 241–242.
10. Accessed at https://earlychurchhistory.org/christian-symbols/the-nestorian-stele-content/.
11. Quoted in Wilken, *First Thousand Years*, pp. 333–334.
12. Michael Buckley, *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambitious Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 35.

# ISLAM

# 5

## The Many Faces of the Muslim Experience

## Overview

"Allahu Akbar [God is most Great]. . . . There is no God but God. Come to prayer." Five times each day, Muslims throughout the world are called to prayer.

The images and realities of Islam and of Muslims across the world are multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory. Although poor villagers and wealthy urban professionals from Nigeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Indonesia assemble peacefully for prayer, violent Islamic extremists attack Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan. On the streets of Cairo, Geneva, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta, some Muslim women appear in stylish Islamic dress or Western fashions, while others wear dresses and veils that cover their hair and bodies.

Although in many Muslim societies the status of women is undermined by patriarchal cultures and reflects serious inequality, there are also significant indications of change. For example, in Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf countries, women continue to graduate from universities at higher rates than their male counterparts. While increasing numbers find employment, women are still more likely than men to be unemployed after graduation.

◀ Adherents of the Sufi Naqshbandi order at the Islamic Institute in Cairo, one of the major mystical orders in Islam.

# Islam Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| ca. 570 | Birth of Muhammad |
| 610 | Muhammad receives first revelation, commemorated as the Night of Power and Excellence |
| 620 | Muhammad's Night Journey to Jerusalem |
| 622 | Emigration (*hijra*) of the Muslim community from Mecca to Medina; first year of the Muslim lunar calendar |
| 632 | Muhammad's final pilgrimage to Mecca, farewell sermon, and death |
| 632–661 | Rule of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, formative period for Sunnis |
| 638 | Muslim conquest of Jerusalem |
| 661–750 | Umayyad Empire |
| 680 | Martyrdom of Husayn and his followers at Karbala, Iraq |
| 750–1258 | Abbasid Empire: height of Islamic civilization, patronage of art and culture, development of Islamic law, and rising trade, agriculture, industry, and commerce |
| 756–1492 | Andalusia (Muslim Spain): period of interfaith coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews |
| 8th–9th c. | Formation of major Sunni law schools |
| 1000–1492 | Christian reconquest of Muslim-ruled territories in Spain, Sicily, and Italy |
| 1095–1453 | Crusades |
| 12th c. | Rise of Sufi orders |
| 1187 | Saladin and Muslim forces reconquer Jerusalem |
| 1281–1924 | Ottoman Empire (Middle East, North Africa, and portions of Eastern Europe) |
| 1453 | Fall of Constantinople/Istanbul, capital of former Byzantine Empire, to Ottomans |
| 1483–1857 | Mughal Empire (South Asia) |
| 1501–1722 | Safavid Empire (Iran) |
| 1876–1938 | Muhammad Iqbal, Islamic modernist and ideologue for foundation of Pakistan |
| 1897–1975 | Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States |
| 1903–1979 | Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi, founder of the Jamaat-i-Islami in India/Pakistan |
| 1906–1949 | Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt |
| 1906–1966 | Sayyid Qutb, radical, militant ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1950s and 1960s |
| 1975 | Wallace D. Muhammad (name later changed to Warith Deen Muhammad) succeeds his father, Elijah Muhammad, and progressively brings his followers into conformity with mainstream Sunni Islam |
| 1988 | Naguib Mahfouz becomes first Muslim and first Arab to win the Nobel Prize for Literature |
| 1989 | Death *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie and his publishers who were aware of the book's content for committing blasphemy and apostasy in *The Satanic Verses*; liberation of Afghanistan from occupation by the Soviet Union |
| 1990 | The Muslim Brotherhood wins thirty-four of eighty seats in Jordanian Parliament and a Muslim Brotherhood member is elected Speaker of the Parliament |

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| 1991 | FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) wins Algerian municipal and regional elections |
| 1992 | FIS wins parliamentary elections in Algeria and is poised to take leadership of country; leading Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood figure asked to form cabinet, resulting in Muslim Brotherhood heading ministries of education, social services, and justice; military prevents FIS from taking power in Algeria, cancelling results of democratic parliamentary elections; Hezbollah participates in first Lebanese elections in twenty years, sweeping the Shiah vote and winning eight parliamentary seats; Islamic coalition government founded in Afghanistan; last German hostages held by Hezbollah freed; outbreak of civil war between Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, with the use of rape as weapon of war and ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims |
| 1993 | Bombing of World Trade Center, tied to Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman; Jordan holds elections in which Islamic Action Front participates; Anwar Ibrahim becomes Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia; Pakistan hold elections in which Jamaat-i-Islami is permitted to participate |
| 1994 | Taliban appears in Afghanistan, claiming moral leadership and ending civil war |
| 1995 | Welfare (Refah) party wins parliamentary elections; Dr. Necmettin Erbakan becomes Turkey's first Islamist prime minister |
| 1997 | Mohammad Khatami elected president of Iran, opening door to US cultural, scholarly, and economic exchanges |
| 1999 | Abdurrahman Wahid becomes first democratic president of Indonesia |
| 2001 | Shaikhah Fatimah Mubarak is awarded the Marie Curie Medal from UNESCO for her work of eliminating illiteracy and spreading education, particularly among women, in the United Arab Emirates; 9/11 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, spark US-led war against global terrorism and the hunt for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda |
| 2002 | Fatima Jibrell becomes first Muslim woman to win the Goldman Environment Prize for work to end environmental and political destruction in Somalia by empowering women and youth; Algerian-born Dr. Elias Adam Zerhouni becomes first Arab-American and first American Muslim to serve as head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) |
| 2003 | US-led invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein; Iran's Shirin Ebadi becomes first Muslim woman to win Nobel Prize for Peace |
| 2004 | French Parliament bans Muslim headscarf in schools and public places; terrorist train attack by Muslim militants in Madrid, Spain |
| 2005 | *7/7* attacks on London transit system |
| 2006 | Hamas landslide victory in Palestinian elections; Bangladeshi Muslim economist Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank win the Nobel Peace Prize; Keith Ellison becomes first America Muslim to be elected to US House of Representatives; Saddam Hussein hanged in Baghdad |
| 2007 | Turkey reelects Prime Minister Erdogan and Justice and Development Party in parliamentary elections; Declaration on Muslim–Christian Relations signed by some 138 Muslim religious leaders and authorities |

# Islam Timeline *continued*

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| 2008 | King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia convenes conference in Mecca of major Muslim religious leaders to consider issue of inter-religious dialogue |
| 2009 | Popular protests in Iran following controversial presidential elections marred by corruption and nicknamed the "Twitter Revolution" because of its use of social networking tools to organize nonviolent protests |
| 2010 | Reelection of Erdogan in Turkey; beginning of the "Arab Spring," sparked a series of nonviolent protests calling for greater levels of democracy, freedom, and an end to government corruption in Tunisia and Egypt; Osama bin Laden, the founder and head of the militant Islamic group al-Qaeda, killed in Pakistan by American military; Ennahda (the Renaissance Party), a mainstream Islamic party in Tunisia's first democratic election, wins a plurality of votes in the Constituent Assembly |
| 2012 | In first open democratic elections in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood wins a majority of the vote in the parliamentary election to the People's Assembly, and the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi is elected president |
| 2013 | After widespread antigovernment demonstrations, Mohammed Morsi is overthrown in a military-led coup; Egyptian security forces use lethal force during protests against the coup, killing more than 625 and injuring thousands |
| 2014 | Tunisian Assembly passes new constitution; Egyptian court sentences 529 members of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood to death, the largest mass death sentence in modern Egyptian history; Malala Yousafzai of Pakistan awarded Nobel Prize for Peace; Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi takes the title caliph and renames the movement the Islamic State (IS), claiming its goal was the restoration of the Caliphate |
| 2015 | National Dialogue Quartet awarded Nobel Prize; Aziz Sancar of Turkey awarded Nobel Prize for Chemistry |
| 2015 | Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change in response to Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato si'* |
| 2015–2016 | Muslim extremist terror attacks, including operations in Paris, Brussels, Nice, and San Bernardino, CA |
| 2016 | Recent and current Muslim women presidents: Atifete Jahjaga (Kosovo) and Bibi Ameenah Firdaus Gurib-Fakim (Mauritius); the Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities—250 Muslim religious leaders, heads of state, and scholars defend the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries |
| 2019 | Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS killed himself on October 27, detonating a suicide vest during a raid conducted by the US forces in Syria's Idlib Province; Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar meet at the Vatican |

While Saudi Arabia has been a sex-segregated society, in recent years some reforms have been introduced, and women are increasingly visible in some though not all professions. But in other countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Malaysia, and Indonesia, women work as engineers, doctors, scientists, teachers, and lawyers but remain a minority in the work force. In contrast to those in many Muslim countries, Muslim women in America are as educated and earn as much as American Muslim men. Parenthetically, among religious groups in America, Muslims represent the second highest levels of education, after Jews.

Islamic associations in the poor neighborhoods of Cairo, Algiers, Beirut, and Mindanao provide families who cannot afford state services or who live under governments that do not provide adequate social services with inexpensive and efficient educational, legal, and medical social services. Many mainstream Muslims have worked for democratic reforms, turning to the ballot box when given the opportunity. Members of Islamic organizations have been elected to parliaments, including those of Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. They have been elected prime minister of Turkey and served as president of Indonesia and Turkey and in cabinet-level positions in many countries. Others have been elected officials in professional associations of doctors, lawyers, engineers, journalists, and teachers. At the same time, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 signaled a new era of global terror from the Middle East to South Asia, Russia, Europe, the United States, and beyond.

This chapter will look at the history and heritage of **Islam** and their impact on **Muslim** societies and world events today. It will explore the challenges and struggles within the global Muslim community in defining the meaning of Islam for modern and postmodern life.

**Islam:** submission or surrender to God

**Muslim:** one who follows Islam

The study of Islam and Muslim societies requires bridging the gap between religion, history, politics, and culture. Let us begin by briefly discussing both what Islam is and where the Islamic world is.

The word *islam* means "submission" or "surrender." A Muslim is one who submits, who seeks to actualize God's will. The Muslim community (***ummah***) is a transnational community of believers, ordained and guided by God, whose mission is to spread and institutionalize an Islamic Order, to create a socially just society: "You are the best community ever brought forth for mankind, enjoining what is good and forbidding evil" (Quran 3:110).

***ummah:*** Muslim community of believers

"Say: He is Allah, the One and only; Allah, the Eternal. He did not beget, nor is He begotten; And there is none like Him."

—Quran 112:1–4

Islam belongs to the Abrahamic family of monotheistic faiths. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims view themselves as the children of Abraham, as proclaimed in each of their sacred scriptures: the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), the New Testament, and the Quran. Despite significant differences, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a belief in one God, the creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe who is beyond ordinary experience. All three religions believe in angels, Satan, prophets,

Mecca is the holiest city of Islam: the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, where the earliest revelations occurred and toward which Muslims turn in prayer five times each day. Here, Muslims on pilgrimage gather near Mecca's Grand Mosque following Friday dawn prayers.

revelation, moral responsibility and accountability, divine judgment, and reward or punishment. Yet while Jews and Christians claim descent from Abraham and his wife, Sarah, through their son Isaac, Muslims trace their religious roots back to Abraham (Ibrahim) through Ismail, his son by Hagar.

Today, Islam is the world's second-largest religion. Its 1.8 billion followers can be found in some fifty-seven predominantly Muslim countries, extending from North Africa to Southeast Asia (Map 5.1). Although Islam is often associated with the Arabs, they constitute only about 20 percent of the worldwide Muslim community. In fact, the vast majority of Muslims live in Asia and Africa: Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nigeria. In recent years, Islam has become a significant presence in the West as the second- or third-largest religion in Europe (in particular, France, Germany, and England) and in North America. Today, the capitals or major cities of Islam are not only traditional strongholds like Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Mecca, Islamabad, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur, but also London, Paris, Marseilles, Brussels, New York, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

In contrast to the modern secular belief in the separation of church and state, Islam for many Muslims represents a comprehensive worldview in which religion and society, faith and power, are more closely bound. Throughout much of history, to be a Muslim was not simply to belong to a faith community but to live in an Islamic community or state, governed (in theory, if not always in practice) by Islamic law. Historically, Islam has significantly informed politics and society, giving rise to vast Islamic empires and states as well as Islamic civilizations.

Map 5.1 The Muslim world.

From Islam's origins to the present, Muslims have been engaged in a continuous process of understanding and interpreting the word of God (**Quran**) and applying Islamic practices to their lives. Thus, while it is correct to say that there is one Islam, revealed in the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, there have been many interpretations of Islam: some complementing each other, and others in conflict.

**Quran:** Muslim scripture

Muslims today, like other people of faith, struggle with the relationship of their religious tradition to modernity and postmodernity. How does a faith revealing a God-centered universe speak to a modern, post-Enlightenment, human-centered, secular world that emphasizes reason and science? Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam contends with questions about a range of social, cultural, and scientific issues. And these questions are many: What is the relationship of Islam to secularization? Should Islam today be restricted to personal life, or should it be integral to the

Muslim dietary law, like Judaism's kosher law, requires the ritual slaughter of animals permitted to be eaten. Today across America, *halal* butcher shops may be found, providing these religiously prepared meats for their Muslim customers.

state, law, and society? Is Islam compatible with modern forms of political participation and democracy? In the twenty-first century, what is the meaning and role of *sharia* and *jihad*? What is the relationship of religion to the religious extremism and violence of militant Muslim groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS? What is the relationship of religion and Islamic law to gender relations, the status of women, religious minorities, and non-Muslims?

## Encounter with Modernity: The Challenge of Western Colonialism

Throughout history, Muslims believed that the early and rapid expansion of Islam and Islamic empires, their success and their power, were signs of God's guidance of and pleasure with the Islamic community. Yet the Islamic world witnessed upheaval as Muslims absorbed the impact of European colonialism, which challenged Muslim historical self-understanding and pride and, in many cases, self-governance. By the nineteenth century, Europeans had colonized many Muslim areas: the French in North, West, and Equatorial Africa and the Levant (Lebanon and Syria); the British in Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, the Arabian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, and Malaya (Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei); and the Dutch in Indonesia. Muslims found themselves on the defensive against a European imperialism that threatened their political, religious, and cultural identity and challenged time-honored beliefs and practices. Muslim responses to colonialism and Western culture and ideas varied from rejection and confrontation to admiration and imitation.

***ijtihad***: interpretation or independent reasoning in Islamic law

Many conservative religious leaders resisted any significant change, while new Western-oriented elites opted for a Western secular approach. Islamic modernist reformers, however, sought a middle path that would restore their debilitated community by bridging the gap between their heritage and modernity. These reformers emphasized the compatibility of Islam with reason, modern science, and technology, reminding Muslims of the contributions by Islamic civilization to philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics, and architecture. Reformers championed the need for ***ijtihad***, the reinterpretation of Islamic law to meet the needs of the modern world. However, they neither produced a systematic reinterpretation of Islam nor developed effective organizations and institutions to promote their reformist message. These two failures led to the emergence of modern Islamic activist organizations (sometimes referred to as fundamentalist movements), such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin) in the Middle East and Jamaat-i-Islami (the Islamic Society) in South Asia. Both organizations criticized Islamic reformers for Westernizing Islam. In particular, they

condemned those Muslim countries that uncritically adopted Western models of development. Islam, they insisted, is a comprehensive way of life that offers an alternative path to Western social order, including capitalism, communism, and socialism. These activist movements and their many offshoots, from mainstream social and political organizations to radical revolutionary groups, continue to be major forces today.

During the post–World War II era, most of the Muslim world regained its independence. However, the boundaries of modern nation-states such as Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Malaysia, and Pakistan were arbitrarily drawn by the European colonizers. Indeed, many Muslim rulers were appointed by colonial governments; others, often military officers or former officers, simply seized power. As a result, instead of elected governments, much of the Muslim world received a legacy of autocratic rulers (kings, military, and ex-military) not of their choosing.

The political legitimacy of rulers and issues of national identity have plagued many of these nations to this day. Their governments have relied for control and stability on internal security forces rather than elections. Because the West provided the models for development, it was widely supposed that modernization and progress would depend on Westernization and secularization. Iran's Islamic revolution of 1978–1979 shattered this assumption.

## The Islamic Resurgence

The Iranian revolution drew attention to the reassertion of Islam in politics and society, but for more than a decade before 1979, Islam had already become a major factor in Muslim politics in Egypt, Libya, and Pakistan. The crushing military defeat of combined Arab forces in the Six-Day War with Israel of 1967, which resulted in Israel's occupation of major Palestinian territories (the Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, West Bank, and especially Jerusalem, the third-holiest city of Islam), became "the disaster" in Muslim consciousness.

Despite national independence, most Muslim countries remained politically and economically weak, underdeveloped, and dependent on the West. What went wrong? To regain past power and glory, many Muslims believed that they must return to the straight path of Islam. The 1973 Arab oil embargo and the later Islamic revolution in Iran reinforced the belief that Muslim economic and political power could be attributed to the resurgence of Islam in contemporary Muslim politics and society.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Islam enjoyed a higher profile in both personal and public life, demonstrated by greater religious observance and Islamic dress as well as the growth of Islamic political and social organizations and institutions. In addition, governments in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and Pakistan, as well as their opposition political parties, turned to Islam in politics during the 1970s and 1980s to enhance their legitimacy and mobilize popular support. At the same time, Islamic activist organizations grew in number and size throughout the Muslim world. Alongside Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Sudan were

violent revolutionary organizations like Jund Allah (Army of God), Hezbollah (the Party of God), and Islamic Jihad.

Yet by the late 1980s and 1990s, a quiet (nonviolent) revolution had also occurred. From North Africa to Southeast Asia, Islam was playing an increasingly important role in the political and socioeconomic life of society. In the twenty-first century, Islamic activists and parties became a significant factor in electoral politics in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Palestine, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Many authoritarian rulers experienced the power of religion in Muslim politics through the votes of Islamic supporters as well as the bullets of the more radical groups.

### Islam in the West

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in North America and in Europe; the second-largest religion in Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany; and the third-largest religion in the United States. Even without increases in Muslim immigration and conversions to Islam, projected Muslim birthrates will result in Islam's replacing Judaism as the second-largest religion in the United States by mid-century.

Muslims in the United States, like other religious or ethnic minorities before them, face many questions about their faith and identity: Are they Muslims in America or American Muslims? Can Muslims become part of a pluralistic American society without compromising or losing their faith and identity? Can people be Muslims in a non-Muslim state that is not governed by Islamic law? Will their equality of citizenship, rights, and civil liberties be recognized by the US legal system and Muslim religious and cultural differences accommodated like those of other religious and ethnic groups? While some in the West speak of a post-Christian society, for many Muslims the concept of a post-Islamic society is not relevant. For them, the debate is not whether religion has a place and a role in society, but rather what kind of Islam or Islamic presence should exist. Understanding Islam today requires an appreciation of the full spectrum of Muslim responses to the modern world, ranging from those who view Islam as a personal faith to others who wish to see it implemented more formally in state and society.

Throughout the ages, when Muslims have sought to define or redefine their lives, the starting point has always been an understanding of the past. To understand Islam's present and future, we must learn about the history and development of Islam and the Muslim community.

## Premodern Islam: The Formative Era

For Muslims, the formative period is the time of the Prophet Muhammad, a period that included the revelation of the Quran and Muhammad's founding of the first community. It is often seen as the time of the purest and most authentic Islamic

community, a society that was to be emulated by future generations, and a model to return to for inspiration and guidance. Because of the remarkable success of Muhammad and the early Muslim community in spreading the faith of Islam and the rule of Muslims, an idealized memory of Islamic history and of Muslim rule became the model for success, serving as a common reference point for later generations of reformers. At the core of Muslim belief and faith are the messenger and the message. As Christians look to Jesus and the New Testament and Jews look to Moses and the Torah, Muslims regard Muhammad and the Quran as the final, perfect, and complete revelation of God's will for humankind.

The foundations of Islam are belief in God (**Allah**, Arabic for "The God") and in God's messenger, Muhammad. Although God is beyond our ordinary experience, or is transcendent, Islam teaches that God can be known through his messengers and revelations. Thus, Muhammad and the Quran, the final messenger and the message/revelation, are key in the formation and development of the Islamic tradition, its beliefs, laws, rituals, and social practices. Learning more about the messenger and the message will increase our understanding of Islam today and our insights about the sources Muslims use to guide their lives in the twenty-first century.

**Allah:** God

## Muhammad's Early Life

Few observers in the sixth century would have predicted that Muhammad ibn Abdullah and his birthplace in central Arabia would come to play pivotal roles in world history and world religions. They could not have imagined the future impact of an orphan raised in a vast desert region marked by tribal warfare and bounded by two great imperial powers, the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire and the Persian (Sassanid) Empire. And yet the message Muhammad brought from God and the force of his personality would transform Arabia and have a significant impact on much of the world.

Pre-Islamic Arabian society and religion were tribal in structure and organization. Individuals lived in extended families; several related families constituted a clan; a cluster of several clans comprised a tribe. Al Ilah (Allah) was seen as the high god over a pantheon of tribal gods and goddesses who were believed to be directly active in everyday life. Each city or town had its divine patron/protectors and shrine. These tribal gods and goddesses were respected and feared focal points of sacrifice, prayer, and pilgrimage. The tribal polytheism of Arabia was embodied in a cube-shaped building that housed the idols of 360 tribal gods and was a center of pilgrimage. Located in the ancient city of Mecca, this cube, called the Kaaba, would be rededicated to Allah in the seventh century.

Tribal polytheism was little concerned with an afterlife, divine judgment, or reward or punishment after death. Individual identity and rights were subordinated to tribal and family identity, authority, and law. The key virtue, "manliness," included loyalty to family and protection of its members, bravery in battle, hospitality, and

***jahiliyya*:** unbelief; ignorance; used to describe the pre-Islamic era

honor. There was little sense of moral responsibility and accountability beyond tribal and family honor. This era, in which justice was guaranteed and administered not by God but by the threat of retaliation by family or tribe, is referred to as the period of ignorance (***jahiliyya***) before Islam.

Forms of monotheism did exist in Arabia; both Arab Christian and Jewish communities had long resided in the region. The Quran also speaks of Arab monotheists, *hanifs*, descendants of Ibrahim (Abraham). In addition, Arab traders would have encountered Judaism and Christianity as Jewish and Christian merchants regularly came to Mecca, a major center for trade as well as pilgrimage. However, monotheism's most powerful appeal to the Arabs came only when the Prophet Muhammad is said to have received his revelation from Allah.

Both in his lifetime and throughout Muslim history, Muhammad ibn Abdullah has served as the ideal model for Muslim life. He is viewed as the last or final prophet, who brought the final revelation of God. Thus, the Prophet and his example, or *Sunnah*, are central to Islam and Muslim belief and practice. Muhammad is not only the ideal political leader, statesman, merchant, judge, soldier, and diplomat, but also the ideal husband, father, and friend. Muslims look to his example for guidance in all aspects of life: eating; fasting; praying; the treatment of a spouse, parents, and children; the creation of contracts; the waging of war; and the conduct of diplomacy.

There is little information about Muhammad's life before his call to be God's messenger. The portrait of his childhood and youth is drawn from early Muslim writers, legend, and Muslim belief. Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born in 570 into the ruling tribe of Mecca, the Quraysh. Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad was among the tribe's "poorer cousins," raised by an uncle and later employed in Mecca's thriving caravan business. Muhammad had one wife, Khadija, for twenty-eight years until her death. Much is recorded about Muhammad's relationship with Khadija, who was his closest confidante and strongest supporter. The couple had six children, two sons who died in infancy and four daughters. After Khadija's death, Muhammad married other women, all but one of them widows.

By the age of thirty, Muhammad had become a prominent member of Meccan society. Known for his business skill, he was nicknamed al-Amin, the trustworthy. Reflective by temperament, Muhammad would often retreat to the solitude of Mount Hira to contemplate his life and society. Here in 610, on a night Muslims commemorate as the Night of Power and Excellence, the forty-year-old Muhammad became the messenger of God. He received the first message, or divine revelation, from a figure identified by later tradition as the angel Gabriel: "Recite in the name of your Lord who has created, / Created man out of a germ cell. / Recite, for your Lord is the most generous One, / Who has taught by the pen, / Taught man what he did not know" (Quran 96:1).

Muslims see Muhammad as the last in a long series of biblical prophets. Like Moses, who had received the Torah on Mount Sinai, Muhammad received the first of God's revelations on Mount Hira: "It is He who sent down to you the Book with

the truth, confirming what went before it: and He sent down the Torah and the Injil ["Evangel," "Gospel"] before as a guidance to the people" (Quran 3:3). Also, like Amos and Jeremiah before him, Muhammad served as a "warner" from God who admonished his hearers to repent and obey God, for the final judgment was near.

> Say: "O Men I am only a warner." Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness—theirs shall be forgiveness and generous provision. And those who strive against our signs to avoid them—they shall be inhabitants of Hell (Quran 22:49–50).

Muhammad continued to receive revelations for more than two decades (610–632). Together, these revelations constitute the text of the Quran (literally, "the recitation or reading").

The first ten years of Muhammad's preaching were difficult. At first, he revealed his religious experience to his wife and close friends only. When he finally began to preach God's message, which was critical of the status quo, he encountered the anger of Mecca's powerful political and commercial leaders. In the name of Allah, the one true God, Muhammad increasingly denounced polytheism and thus threatened the livelihood of those who profited enormously from the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Equally problematic, Muhammad preached a message that strongly condemned the socioeconomic inequities of his time. The Prophet denounced the exploitation of the poor, orphans, and widows as well as prevailing business practices, such as false contracts and usury (lending money at very high rates of interest). Muhammad called all true believers to join the community of God, a universal community that transcended tribal bonds and authority and was led by Muhammad, not by the Quraysh.

As Muhammad continued to preach, his situation in Mecca became more difficult. After ten years of rejection and persecution in that city, Muhammad and his followers migrated to Yathrib, renamed Medina ("city" of the prophet) in 622. Invited to serve as arbiter or judge for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Muhammad became the political and religious leader of the community. Medina proved a new beginning, as the Muslim community prospered and grew.

## After the *Hijra*

The emigration (***hijra***) from Mecca to Medina in 622 was a turning point in Muhammad's life and in Islamic history. The central significance of the *hijra* and the birth of the Islamic community (the *ummah*) led to Muslims dating their calendar not from the birth of the Prophet or from the first revelation but from the creation of the Islamic community at Medina. Thus, 622 CE became 1 AH ("after the *hijra*").

***hijra*:** migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina; marks first year in Muslim lunar calendar

Muhammad did not intend to create a new religion; rather, he was a prophet and reformer. His message proclaimed an absolute monotheism, the unity (***tawhid***), or oneness, of God and God's final revelation. Polytheism and idolatry were to be

***tawhid*:** oneness of God; monotheism

condemned and suppressed. Islam was to be a corrective both to Arabian polytheism and, Muslims believe, to the distortions of God's original revelation to Moses and Jesus by the authors/editors of the Bible that had occurred over time. Muhammad called all to repentance, to turn away from the path of unbelief and false practice and toward the straight path (***sharia***) of God. Thus, Muhammad (the last, or "seal," of the prophets; Quran 33:40) and the Quran (the complete, uncorrupted revelation) were a restoration of the true faith and message of God.

***sharia:*** Islamic law

Muhammad taught that submission (*islam*) to God was both an individual and a community obligation. Tribal identity should be replaced by identification with Islam, now the primary source of community solidarity. This belief was reinforced by the Quran's emphasis on social justice and social welfare, in particular the protection of women, orphans, and the poor. Muhammad rejected or reformed some rituals and introduced others. Importantly, he reinterpreted the pre-Islamic Arabian pilgrimage to the Kaaba at Mecca. The Kaaba was cleansed of its 360 tribal idols and rededicated to Allah. Pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca, like prayer five times each day, became one of the Five Pillars, or required practices, of Islam.

While Muhammad led the community at Medina, he, in light of continuing revelations, forged its identity, consolidated its political base, and established its basic religious law and practice.

Muhammad skillfully employed both diplomacy and force to defeat the Meccans and then to unite the tribes of Arabia under the banner of Islam. In 624, Muhammad

The courtyard of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina, the first mosque in Islam, is among the most sacred Islamic sites in Islam. The original structure has been rebuilt and expanded several times.

and his followers successfully engaged and defeated the far larger Meccan forces at the Battle of Badr. For Muslims, then and now, this battle has special significance, a "miraculous" victory in which the forces of Allah and monotheism were pitted against those of Meccan polytheism where, despite overwhelming odds, the army of God vanquished the unbelievers. The Quran itself tells of God's assistance in securing the victory (Quran 8:42ff., 3:123). The Battle of Badr became a symbol of divine favor and intervention that has been remembered and invoked throughout history.

After a three-year series of battles, a truce was struck. However, in 630, Muhammad, charging that the Meccans had broken the truce, led an army of 10,000 on a march to Mecca. The Meccans surrendered without a fight. And Muhammad proved magnanimous in victory, rejecting vengeance and plunder and instead granting amnesty to his former enemies. The majority of the Meccans converted to Islam, accepted Muhammad's leadership, and became part of the Islamic community.

In his early preaching, Muhammad had looked to Jews and Christians as natural allies. As "**People of the Book**," who had received prophets and revelation, they had much in common with Muslims. He anticipated the acceptance of Islam by the Jews of Medina and initially presented himself as a prophetic reformer reestablishing the religion of Abraham. However, the Jewish tribes of Medina, who had lived there for a long time and had political ties with the Quraysh of Mecca, did not accept the reformer's message. The majority of tribes did convert to Islam, but Medina's three Jewish tribes (comprising half the population of Medina) did not. Until that time, Muslims had faced Jerusalem to pray and, like the Jews, fasted on the tenth day of the lunar month. However, when the Jews rejected Muhammad's claims, Muhammad received a revelation and changed the direction of prayer from Jerusalem to Mecca. Thereafter, Islam was presented as a distinct religious alternative to Judaism.

**People of the Book:** those possessing a revelation or scripture from God; refers particularly to Jews and Christians

Muhammad next set forth the Charter (or Constitution) of Medina, which described the rights and duties of all citizens and the relationship of the Muslim community to other communities. Jews were recognized as a separate community, politically allied to the Muslims but retaining internal religious and cultural autonomy. However, political loyalty and allegiance were expected. The Jews' denial of Muhammad's prophethood and message and their political ties with the Meccans became a source of conflict. The Quran accuses some Jewish tribes of regularly breaking treaties: "Why is it that whenever they make pacts, a group among them casts it aside unilaterally?" (Quran 2:100). Muslim perception of intrigue, rejection, and betrayal by the Jewish tribes led first to exile and later to warfare. After the Battle of the Ditch in 627, the Jews of the Banu Qurayza, a Jewish tribe who lived in Yathrib (now Medina), were denounced as traitors who had consorted with the Meccans. In the end, Muhammad moved to crush the remaining Jews in Medina.

"In matters of faith, He has laid down for you the same commandment that He gave Noah, which We have revealed to you [Muhammad] and which We enjoined on Abraham and Moses and Jesus: 'Uphold the faith and do not divide into factions within it.'"

—Quran 42:13

Muhammad's use of warfare was in keeping both with Arab custom and the Hebrew prophets' belief (Exodus 14:14, Deuteronomy 20:4, and 2 Kings 10:25–31) in the conquest and the punishment of "enemies of God." Both believed that God had sanctioned battle with the enemies of the Lord. However, it is important to note that the motivation for Muhammad's actions was political rather than racial or theological.

In 632, Muhammad led the pilgrimage to Mecca. There, the sixty-two-year-old leader delivered a farewell sermon in which he emphasized:

> Know ye that every Muslim is a brother unto every other Muslim, and that ye are now one brotherhood. It is not legitimate for any one of you, therefore, to appropriate unto himself anything that belongs to his brother unless it is willingly given him by that brother.[1]

This event continues to be remembered and commemorated each year by millions of Muslims who make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

## The Message of the Quran

Muslims believe that the Quran is the eternal, literal, and final word of God revealed to Muhammad as guidance for humankind (Quran 2:185). Thus, for Muslims, Islam is not a new religion but rather the oldest, for it represents the "original" as well as the final revelation of God to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

The Prophet Muhammad is seen as an intermediary who received God's message and then communicated it over a period of twenty-two years. The text of the Quran is about four-fifths the length of the New Testament. The Muslim scriptures consists of 114 chapters (***surahs***) of 6,000 verses, arranged by length, not chronology.

***surahs***: chapters of the Quran

The God (Allah) of the Quran is seen as the creator, sustainer, ruler, and judge of humankind. He is merciful and just, the all-knowing and all-powerful, the lord and ruler of the universe. The Quran teaches that God's revelation has occurred in several forms: in nature, in history, and in scripture. God's existence can be known through nature, which points to or contains the "signs" of its creator and sustainer (Quran 3:26–27). Human history also contains clear examples and lessons of God's sovereignty and intervention (Quran 30:2–9). And, finally, God's will for humankind has been revealed through a long line of prophets and messengers: "Indeed We sent forth among every nation a Messenger saying: 'Serve your God and shun false gods'" (Quran 16:36).

Muslims believe that the Quran, like the Torah and the Gospel, is taken from an Arabic tablet, the source of all scriptures, preexisting with God in heaven. From it, the teachings of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) were revealed at different stages in history. Indeed, many Muslims take their names from the biblical prophets, who also are named in the Quran: Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Sulayman (Solomon), Dawud (David), Yahya (John), Maryam (Mary), and Issa (Jesus). Mary, the mother of Jesus, is cited more often in the Quran than in the entire New Testament.

Because Arabic is the language of the Quran, all Muslims memorize, recite, and pray the Quran in Arabic, whether they understand it fully or not. Much as the Roman Catholic Mass until the middle of the twentieth century was always prayed in Latin, Arabic is viewed as the sacred language of Islam; indeed, it is regarded as the language of God. Whatever their local language, Muslims pray in Arabic five times each day.

God's word, as revealed in the Quran, is the final and complete revelation. It provides the primary and ultimate source of guidance, the basis for belief and practice in Islam. Study, memorization, recitation, and copying of the Quran have been central acts of piety. The noble art of copying the Quran has produced a rich tradition of calligraphy. This manuscript page provides a beautiful example.

Because the Quran is regarded as God's sacred Word, it is handled with reverence. Memorization of the entire text of the Quran is a time-honored act of piety. For many Muslims, the clearest evidence of the Quran's power and uniqueness is its impact on its hearers; indeed, many have been moved to conversion after hearing the beauty of a Quranic recitation. Recitation or chanting of the Quran is a major art form as well as an act of worship. Muslims gather in stadiums and auditoriums around the world to attend international Quran recitation competitions. To win an international competition can be a source of great national pride.

## A Golden Age of Expansion, Conquest, and Creativity

The rule of Muhammad and his first four successors, or **caliphs**, is seen by Sunni Muslims as the formative period of Muslim faith and history. After God sent down his final and complete revelation for humankind through his last prophet, the Islamic community/state was created, and the primary sources of Islamic law, the Quran and **Sunnah** of the Prophet, originated. Both reformers and Islamic revivalists today look to this period as the reference point for divine guidance and historical validation. Muslims believe that the revealed message of the Quran and the example of the Prophet and his successors were corroborated in history after "miraculous" victories

**caliphs:** successors of Muhammad as political and military leaders of the Muslim community

**Sunnah:** example set by Muhammad of living the principles of the Quran

at Badr and elsewhere, and by the spread of Islam as a faith as well as its phenomenal geographic and political expansion, which produced Islamic empires.

Muhammad united the tribes of Arabia under the banner of Islam through preaching, diplomacy, and when necessary, force. During the century after his death, the period of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, Muslim armies spread the faith and rule of Islam, inspired by their faith, material rewards (bounty from richer societies), and spiritual rewards (paradise for those who died and were remembered as martyrs). These highly motivated armies overran the Byzantine and Persian empires, which had already been greatly weakened by internal strife and constant warfare between them.

Christendom experienced the early expansion of Islam as a threat to its religious and political dominance. Muslim rule, and with it the message of Islam, quickly spread from the Byzantine and Persian empires to Syria, Iraq, and Egypt and then swept across North Africa and into Europe, where Muslims ruled Spain and the Mediterranean from Sicily to Anatolia (Map 5.2).

***dhimmi***: meaning "protected," refers to non-Muslim peoples who were granted religious freedom under Muslim rule in exchange for payment of a tax

For non-Muslim populations who had been subjugated in Byzantium and Persia, Islamic rule meant an exchange of rulers rather than a loss of independence. Many in Byzantium willingly exchanged Greco-Roman rule for that of the Arabs, with whom they had closer linguistic and cultural affinities and to whom they paid lower taxes. Upon declaration of their allegiance to the Islamic state and payment of a tax, these "protected" (***dhimmi***) peoples could practice their faith and be governed by their religious leaders and law in matters of faith and private life.

Because Muslims believe that the Quran is God's Word or revelation, from an early age children are taught to recite the Quran.

Map 5.2 The Muslim Empire to 750 CE.

Islam proved more tolerant than imperial Christianity, providing greater religious freedom for Jews and indigenous Christians. Under Muslim rule, most local or indigenous Christian communities, which had been persecuted by the "foreign" Christian orthodoxy of their rulers, could now practice their faith.

The rapid spread of imperial Islam produced a vibrant Islamic civilization that flourished from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Urban cultural centers emerged in Cairo, Baghdad, Cordoba, Palermo, and Nishapur. With significant assistance from Christian and Jewish subjects, Muslims collected the great books of science, medicine, and philosophy from the West and the East and translated them into Arabic. The age of translation was followed by a period of great creativity as a new generation of Muslim thinkers and scientists made their own contributions to learning in philosophy, medicine, chemistry, astronomy, algebra, optics, art, and architecture. Towering intellectual giants dominated this period: al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna, 980–1037), Ibn Rushd (known as Averroes, d. 1198), al-Biruni (973–1048), and al-Ghazali (d. 1111).

In later centuries, Europeans, emerging from the Dark Ages, turned to Muslim centers of learning to regain their lost heritage and to learn from Muslim advances. Many of the great medieval Christian philosophers and theologians (Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Abelard, Roger Bacon, and Duns Scotus) acknowledged their intellectual debt to their Muslim predecessors.

The failures and reforms of Muslim societies today, as in the recent past, are often measured against this history, at times romanticized, of an earlier period of brilliant success.

## Diversity, Division, and Dissent

This enameled glass mosque lamp, made in the early 1300s, was dedicated to a Muslim ruler. Quotations from the Quran decorate the lamp.

The accomplishments of Islam's early history were also marked by division. During Muhammad's lifetime, the community had been united by his prophetic claims, charismatic leadership skills, and the divine revelations he continued to receive. However, Muhammad's death led to crises, dissent, and civil wars. Given the pivotal role of Muhammad in the life of the community, his death in 632 was a traumatic event. What was the community to do? Who was to lead? These questions were to threaten the community's survival.

Muhammad's senior followers, known as the Companions of the Prophet, moved quickly to reassure the community. In proclaiming Muhammad's death to the faithful, the Companion Abu Bakr declared: "Muslims! If any of you has worshipped Muhammad, let me tell you that Muhammad is dead. But if you worship God, then know that God is living and will never die." The Companions selected Abu Bakr as caliph (*khalifah*, "successor or deputy"). As caliph, he was not a prophet but rather Muhammad's successor as political and military head of the community.

This next stage in the history of the Muslim community, the Caliphate (632–1258), has traditionally been divided into three periods: the time of the Rightly Guided

Caliphs (632–661), followed by the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) dynasties. During these centuries, a vast empire was created, with successive capitals at Medina, Kufa, Damascus, and Baghdad, resulting in a politically and militarily powerful and culturally brilliant Islamic civilization. However, it was the earliest period, that of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, that was to become the example for later generations of believers.

Abu Bakr (r. 632–634), the first successor of Muhammad, was tested almost immediately when some Arab tribes declared their independence from the community. Abu Bakr crushed the tribal revolt, consolidated Muslim rule over the Arabian Peninsula, and preserved the religiously based unity of the Islamic-community state.

Abu Bakr's successor, Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644), initiated a period of expansion and conquest. During the reign of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan (644–656), from the Umayyad clan, tribal factionalism resurfaced with a series of rebellions that would plague the Islamic community's development.

A second crisis of leadership, with repercussions down through the centuries, occurred when civil war broke out during the reign of the fourth caliph, Ali. Although in 632 the majority of the community had supported the selection of Abu Bakr as caliph, a minority dissented, believing that leadership should stay in the family of the Prophet and thus pass to its senior male member, Ali, instead of Abu Bakr. In addition to being Muhammad's cousin, Ali was the Prophet's son-in-law, having married Fatima, a daughter of Muhammad and Khadija. Shortly after Ali's accession to power, a group that included Muhammad's widow, Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr, challenged his authority. This was followed by the rebellion of Muawiya, the governor of Syria. Arbitration proved inconclusive but did lead to two results that have had a profound impact on the history of Islam.

First, a group of Ali's followers, the Kharajites (those who "go out," or secede), broke away. The Kharajites held both Ali and Muawiya to be unbelievers whose revolt against God was punishable by death. Second, after Ali was assassinated by a group of Kharajites, Muawiya then seized power in Syria and established the Umayyad dynasty (661–750).

The Umayyad dynasty was responsible for the rapid spread of Islam and the emergence of imperial Islam, with its capital in Damascus. However, opposition to what later Muslim historians would characterize as impious Umayyad caliphs also resulted in important reform movements. Some movements, such as the Kharajites and the Shiah, were revolutionary, while others led to the development of Islamic law and mysticism (Sufism).

The Kharajites, who had broken with Ali, emerged as revolutionaries who, though unsuccessful in their own time, continue to inspire contemporary radical groups. The Kharajites interpreted the Quran and the Sunnah literally and sought to impose their beliefs on others. They viewed the world as divided into Muslims, defined as those who agreed with the Kharajites, and infidels, defined as those who differed with the Kharajites and were thus the enemies of God and to be fought and killed.

Like extremist Muslim groups today, the Kharajites, claiming to follow the letter of the Quran and the example of the Prophet, adopted their own interpretation of Islam. Seeing themselves as God's righteous army, they believed that violence was obligatory in their battle against the usurpers of God's rule. Other Muslims who committed an action contrary to the letter of the law (as interpreted or understood by the Kharajites) were guilty of grave sin. According to the Kharajites, they were apostates and thus had committed treason against the Islamic community-state. If they did not repent, they were to be fought against and killed. Many of the components of this early Islamic worldview may be found in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Muslim extremist writings, including those of the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb, who will be discussed in the "Radical Islam" section, and in the ideology of groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.

## The Origins of the Sunni–Shiah Split

**Sunni:** Muslims who accept the Sunnah and the historic succession of the Caliphs

**Shiah:** followers of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad

A second major revolutionary movement spawned by opposition to Umayyad rule was the rebellion by the followers of the fourth caliph, Ali. The results of this violent disagreement would lead to the two major branches of Islam, the communities of the **Sunni** majority and the **Shiah** (also called **Shii)** minority.

The followers (*shiah*, "partisans") of Ali had been thwarted twice: first when Muhammad's cousin was not appointed as the first caliph, and later when Muawiya seized the Caliphate from Ali, the Prophet's fourth successor. In 680, when the Umayyad ruler Yazid, the son of Muawiya, came to power, Husayn, the son of Ali, was persuaded by a group of Ali's followers in Kufa (a city in modern Iraq) to lead a rebellion. However, the support promised to Husayn did not materialize. Husayn and his army were slaughtered by the Umayyad army on the plains of Karbala (also in modern Iraq).

The memory of Karbala and the "martyrdom" of Husayn resulted in a Shiah worldview: a paradigm of suffering, oppression, and protest against injustice. The mentality encouraged by this paradigm was reinforced by the Shiahs' minority status and discrimination against them through the centuries. It sustained the community throughout history and, as Iran is a majority-Shiah state, became a major source of inspiration during Iran's "Islamic" revolution of 1978–1979.

**imam:** in Sunni Islam, the prayer leader and one who delivers the Friday sermon; in Shiah Islam, refers to Ali's descendants, who are believed to be the legitimate leaders (not the Sunni caliphs) of the global Muslim community or *ummah*

Sunni Muslims constitute 85 percent and Shiah approximately 15 percent of the global Islamic community. Although united in their common confession of faith in God, the Quran, and the Prophet Muhammad, their notions of leadership and history differ. The reality of the dynastic Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates notwithstanding, in Sunni Islam the caliph ideally is the selected or elected successor of the Prophet. However, he serves only as the political and military leader of the community. He is not a prophet.

By contrast, in Shiah Islam the **imam**, or leader, is not selected from among the members of the community but must be a direct descendant of the Prophet's family. Moreover, he is both the religious and the political leader of the community.

The Blue Mosque, Shrine of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. Ali was the fourth caliph of Sunni Islam and the first imam of Shiah Islam. Built in the fifteenth century, the mosque has survived countless wars in near-perfect condition. While some believe that it houses the tomb of Ali, most believe that he is buried in the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, Iraq.

Although not a prophet, he is the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, and final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law.

Sunnis and Shiah also developed differing interpretations of history. For Sunnis, the early success of Islam and the power of its rulers were signs of God's rewards to a faithful community and historical validation of Muslim belief and claims. In contrast, the Shiah saw the same events as the illegitimate usurpation of power by Sunni rulers. For the Shiah, therefore, history is the theater for the struggle of a minority community, righteous but historically disinherited and oppressed, that must restore God's rule on earth under his imam. The early centuries of Islamic history would witness ongoing struggles between Sunnis and Shiah, but also the remarkable development of Muslim religious thought (Islamic law, theology, and mysticism), institutions, traditions, and civilization.

## Premodern Islam: The Classical Era

A critical issue faced by all religious believers today is the continuity of current religious belief and practice with centuries-old sacred traditions. So, too, Islamic tradition and heritage are used to justify contemporary beliefs and practices and as the basis for Islamic reform.

## Law and Mysticism: The Exterior and Interior Paths to God

Dissatisfaction with Umayyad rule, in which wealth led to abuse of power and corruption, resulted in the development of two non-revolutionary reform movements: the ***ulama*** (religious scholars, or learned ones), with their Islamic law, and the Sufis, whose Islamic mysticism we shall discuss later.

***ulama***: religious scholars

***jihad***: the struggle to be a good Muslim, to follow God's will; armed struggle in defense of Islam or the Muslim community; offensive warfare by Muslim leaders to spread their rule or by Muslim terrorists to legitimate their actions

In contrast to Christianity's emphasis on doctrine or theology, Islam, like Judaism, places primary emphasis on religious observance of and obedience to God's law. Muslims are commanded by the Quran to struggle (the literal word for struggle is ***jihad***) in the path (*sharia*) of God, to realize, spread, and defend God's message and community. The faithful are to function as God's representatives on earth, promoting good and prohibiting evil (Quran 3:104, 3:110). All Muslims are responsible, as individuals and as a community, for the creation of the good society. Despite vast cultural differences, Islamic law is both an idealized blueprint and a moral compass that has provided guidance and a code of behavior for Muslims throughout the ages.

"Goodness is not turning your faces towards the East or West; goodness is to believe in Allah, the Last Day, angels, and the Book, and the prophets; to spend money, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the freeing of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and pay the alms tax regularly; to fulfill contracts you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Those are truthful and God-fearing people."

—Quran 2:177

Islamic law developed during the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth and ninth centuries as a response to religious as well as political concerns. Legal experts developed and standardized the law, with a view to limiting the power of the caliph or his appointed judges. Islamic law continued to flourish during the tenth century under the Abbasid caliphs, who overthrew the Umayyads and legitimated their revolution by becoming the patrons of Islam and Islamic law. It is important to note that Islamic law did not develop primarily from the practice of courts or from government decrees but through the interpretation of scholars. In Sunni Islam, the *ulama* based a religious blueprint on four official sources of Islamic law: the Quran, the Sunnah, *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ijma* (consensus).

The primary material sources of Islamic law are the Quran and Sunnah (example) of the Prophet. The Quran contains eighty prescriptions that would qualify as law in the strict sense of the term; the majority of Quranic texts provide general principles and values, reflecting what the aims and aspirations of Muslims should be.

The second source of law is the Sunnah, which comes from the Quran, early biographies, and especially prophetic traditions. The Sunnah consists of hundreds of thousands of narrative stories or reports (***hadith***) about what the Prophet said and did and seemingly addresses every situation. The centrality of the Prophetic traditions cannot be overestimated: "They are associated with the person who is 'alive' here and now and who is as revered and loved by all Muslims now as he was fourteen centuries ago."[2]

***hadith***: narrative report of Muhammad's sayings and action

***qiyas***: legal term for analogical reasoning

The third source of law is analogical reasoning (***qiyas***). When confronted by a question or issue not addressed specifically in the Quran or Sunnah, jurists looked for similar or analogous portions of scripture to identify principles that could be applied to a new case. For example, no specific text deals with the use of mind-altering drugs, but from *qiyas*, jurists can justify the condemnation of such substances on the basis of sacred texts that plainly forbid the consumption of alcohol.

Finally, consensus (***ijma***) is based on a statement traditionally attributed to the Prophet: "My community will never agree on an error." In reality, consensus has generally amounted to acceptance of or agreement on an issue from the majority of religious scholars who represented religious authority.

***ijma*:** in Islamic law, consensus

Islamic law has two main divisions. The first concerns a Muslim's duties to God, which consist of obligatory religious practices such as the Five Pillars of Islam. The second involves social transactions or duties to others, which include regulations governing public life, from contract and international law to laws on marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Islamic law is a source of unity and guidance, but individual jurists and legal scholars from diverse social backgrounds and cultural contexts have differed in their interpretation of texts, in their personal opinions, and in their notions of equity and public welfare. Diversity and disagreement in Islamic law are reflected in the acceptance of different law schools and the validity of their divergent opinions.

We see these differences in official legal opinions or interpretations (***fatwas***) of Muslim jurists (***muftis***) who advised judges and litigants in the past and in recent times. In the Persian Gulf War of 1991, some *muftis* supported Iraq, and others supported a US-led coalition that included troops from Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, sharp differences have existed among religious leaders over the religious legitimacy or illegitimacy of suicide bombing in Israel-Palestine. But however different and contentious interpretations of Islamic law have been throughout Islamic history, the Five Pillars of Islam unite all Muslims in their worship and following of God.

***fatwas*:** legal opinions or interpretations from a Muslim legal expert (*mufti*)

***muftis*:** legal experts who issue *fatwas* to judges and litigants

## The Five Pillars of Islam

If God, the Quran, and the Prophet Muhammad unite all Muslims in their common belief, the Five Pillars of Islam provide a unity of practice:

### *The Declaration of Faith*

The Declaration of Faith is the first pillar of Islam. A Muslim is one who bears witness, who testifies that "there is no god but God [Allah] and Muhammad is the messenger of God." This declaration is known as the ***shahada*** (witness, testimony). Allah is the Arabic name for God, just as Yahweh is the Hebrew name for God used in the Old Testament. To become a Muslim, one need only make this simple proclamation.

"Recite what has been revealed to you of the Book and perform prayer regularly: for prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds. Allah's remembrance is the greatest (thing in life) and Allah knows what you do."

—Quran 29:45

***shahadah*:** Muslim declaration of faith

The first part of this proclamation affirms Islam's absolute monotheism, the uncompromising belief in the oneness or unity of God, as well as the doctrine that association of anything else with God is idolatry and the one unforgivable sin. As we see in Quran 4:48: "God does not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He does forgive whomever He wishes to for anything else. Anyone who gives God associates [partners] has invented an awful sin." This helps us to understand the Islamic belief that Islam's revelation is intended to correct such departures from the "straight path" as the Christian concept of the Trinity and veneration of the Virgin Mary in Christianity.

The second part of the confession of faith asserts that Muhammad is not only a prophet but also a messenger of God, a higher role also played by Moses and Jesus before him. For Muslims, Muhammad is the vehicle for the last and final revelation. In accepting Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," they believe that his prophecy confirms and completes all of the revealed messages, beginning with Adam's. In addition, somewhat like Jesus Christ, Muhammad serves as the preeminent role model through his life example. The believer's effort to follow Muhammad's example reflects the emphasis of Islam on practice and action. In this regard, Islam is more like Judaism, with its emphasis upon the law, than like Christianity, which gives greater weight to the importance of doctrines or dogma. This practical orientation of Islam is reflected in the remaining four Pillars of Islam.

### *Prayer*

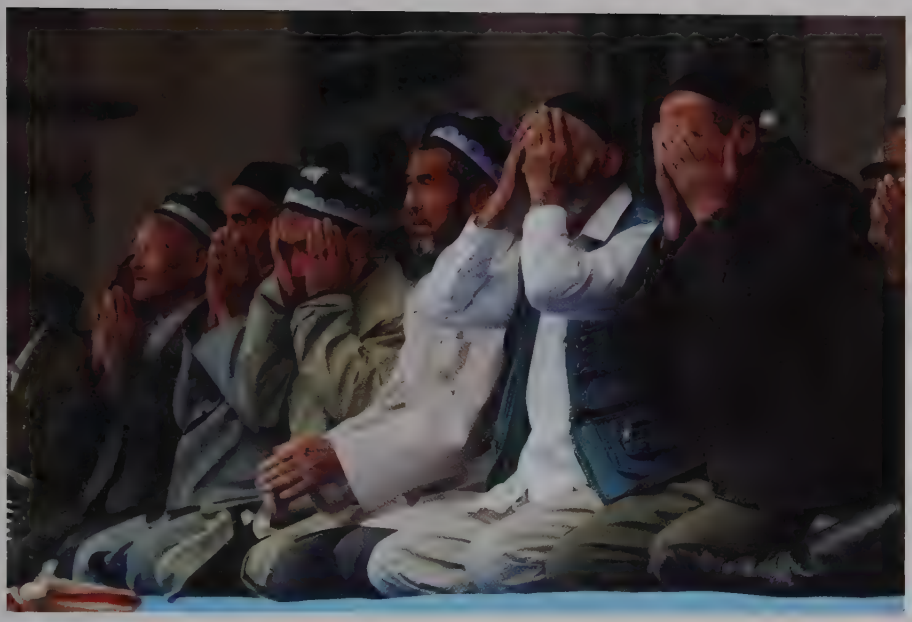
***salat*:** prayer performed five times each day

The second pillar of Islam is prayer (***salat***). Muslims pray (or, perhaps more correctly, worship) five times throughout the day: at daybreak, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and evening. Although the times for prayer and the ritual actions were not specified in the Quran, Muhammad established them. In many Muslim countries, reminders to pray, or "calls to prayer," echo out across the rooftops. Aided by a megaphone, from high atop a mosque's minaret, the muezzin calls out:

> God is most great [Allahu Akbar], God is most great, God is most great, God is most great, I witness that there is no god but God [Allah]; I witness that there is no god but God. I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God. I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Come to prayer; come to prayer! Come to prosperity; come to prosperity! God is most great. God is most great. There is no god but God.

These reminders throughout the day help to keep believers mindful of God in the midst of everyday concerns about work and family with all their attractions and distractions. It strengthens the conscience, reaffirms total dependence on God, and puts worldly concerns within the perspective of death, the Last Judgment, and the afterlife. The prayers consist of recitations from the Quran in Arabic and glorification of God. These are accompanied by a sequence of movements: standing, bowing, kneeling, touching the ground with one's forehead, and sitting. Both the recitations and the accompanying movements express submission, humility, and adoration of God. Muslims can pray in any clean environment, alone or together, in a mosque or at home, at work or on the road, indoors or out. It is considered preferable and more meritorious to pray with others, if possible, as one body united in the worship of God and thus demonstrating discipline, brotherhood, equality, and solidarity.

As they prepare to pray, Muslims face Mecca, the holy city that houses the Kaaba. Each act of worship begins with the declaration that "God is most great" ("*Allahu Akbar*") and is followed by fixed prayers that include the opening verse



These Uzbek Muslims, like fellow believers across the world, perform their prayers five times each day.

of the Quran. At the end of the prayer, the *shahada* (declaration of faith) is again recited, and the "peace greeting"—"Peace be upon all of you and the mercy and blessings of God"—is repeated twice.

On Friday, the noon prayer is a congregational prayer that usually takes place in a mosque (***masjid***, "place of prostration"). A special feature of the Friday prayer is a sermon (***khutba***), preached from a pulpit (***minbar***). Since there is no priesthood in Islam, any Muslim may lead the prayer. In many communities, larger mosques do have an imam who leads the prayer and is paid to look after the mosque.

***masjid:*** a building used for public and community worship; also known as a mosque

***khutba:*** sermon delivered in a mosque on Fridays

***minbar:*** mosque pulpit from which is preached

***zakat:*** almsgiving

A muezzin calling the faithful to prayer in the city of Kashgar in western China.

## *Almsgiving*

Almsgiving, the third pillar of Islam, is called ***zakat***, which means "purification." Like prayer, which is both an individual and a communal responsibility, *zakat* expresses a Muslim's worship of and thanksgiving to God by supporting the poor. It requires an annual contribution of 2.5 percent of an individual's wealth and assets, not merely a percentage of annual income. In Islam, the true owner of things is not man but God.

"Alms for the poor, the needy, and those employed to administer the [funds]; for those whose hearts are bound together; as well as for freeing slaves and [repaying] debts; spending in the cause of Allah and for the wayfarer: thus Allah commands, and Allah is All-Knowing and Wise."

—Quran 9:60

People are given their wealth as a trust from God. Therefore, *zakat* is not viewed as "charity." It is an obligation for those who have received their wealth from God to respond to the needs of less fortunate members of the community. The Quran (9:60) as well as Islamic law stipulate that alms are to be used to support the poor, orphans, and widows; to free slaves and debtors; and to support those working in the "cause of God" (e.g., construction of mosques, religious schools, and hospitals). *Zakat*, developed fourteen centuries ago, functions as a form of social security in a Muslim society. In Shiah Islam, in addition to the *zakat*, which is not limited to 2.5 percent, believers pay a religious tax (*khums*) on their income to a religious leader. This is used to support the poor and needy.

### *The Fast of Ramadan*

The fourth pillar of Islam, the Fast of Ramadan occurs once each year during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and the month in which the first revelation of the Quran came to Muhammad. During this month-long fast, every Muslim whose health permits must abstain from dawn to sunset from food, drink, and sexual activity. Fasting is a practice common to many religions, sometimes undertaken as penance and sometimes to free us from undue focus on physical needs and appetites. In Islam, the discipline of the Ramadan fast is intended to stimulate reflection on human frailty and dependence upon God, focus on spiritual goals and values, and identification with and response to the less fortunate.

Muslims are required to abstain from food and drink from dawn tc dusk during the month of Ramadan. At dusk each day during Ramadan, families gather to break the fast and share a meal. This practice is called "breakfast."

Families and friends share a special late evening meal together, often including special foods and sweets served only at this time of the year. Many go to the mosque for the evening prayer, followed by special prayers recited only during Ramadan. Some will recite the entire Quran (one-thirtieth each night of the month) as a special act of piety, and public recitations of the Quran or Sufi chanting can be heard throughout the evening. Families rise before sunrise to take their first meal of the day, which must sustain them until sunset.

Near the end of Ramadan (the twenty-seventh day), Muslims commemorate the Night of Power and Excellence when Muhammad first received God's revelation. The month of Ramadan ends with one of the two major Islamic celebrations, the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast, called Id al-Fitr, which resembles Christmas in its spirit of joyfulness, special celebrations, and gift giving.

### *The Pilgrimage to Mecca*

***hajj*:** annual pilgrimage to Mecca, in which all adult Muslims are expected to participate at least once if physically and financially able

The fifth pillar of Islam is the Pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrimage season follows Ramadan. Every adult Muslim who is physically and financially able is expected to perform the pilgrimage (***hajj***) to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in his or her lifetime. Just as Muslims are united five times each day when they face Mecca in worship, each year almost 2 million Muslims from every part of the globe make the physical journey to this spiritual center of Islam, where they again experience the unity, breadth, and diversity of the Islamic community. Pilgrims wear white garments, symbolizing for everyone, rich and poor alike, the unity and equality of all believers before God. Men and women worship together. There is no segregation of the sexes.

When the pilgrims reach Mecca, they proceed to the Grand Mosque that houses the Kaaba. There, they pray at the spot where Abraham, the patriarch and father of monotheism, stood, and they circumambulate (walk around) the Kaaba seven times. Another part of the *hajj* is a visit to the Plain of Arafat, the site of Muhammad's last sermon, where pilgrims seek God's forgiveness for their sins and for those of all Muslims throughout the world.

The pilgrimage ends with the celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice (Id al-Adha). The "great feast" commemorates God's testing of Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Ismail (in the Jewish and Christian traditions, it is Isaac who is put at risk). Commemorating God's final permission to Abraham to substitute a ram for his son, Muslims sacrifice animals (sheep, goats, and cattle) not only in Mecca but across the Muslim world. While some of the meat is consumed, most is distributed to the poor. The three-day Feast of Sacrifice is a time for rejoicing, prayer, and visiting with family and friends.

In addition to the *hajj*, there is a devotional ritual referred to as the "lesser pilgrimage." It is called the *umrah* (visitation) and involves visiting holy sites at other times of the year. Many who are on pilgrimage also perform the *umrah* rituals before, during, or after the *hajj*. However, performing the *umrah* does not fulfill the *hajj* obligation.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five Pillars of Islam. All Muslims, health and wealth permitting, are expected to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime.

The focus of the pilgrimage is the Kaaba, "the cube," also known as the House of God, which tradition says was built by Abraham and his son Ismail. Pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba, located within the Great Mosque of Mecca. This is a ritual act that many believe symbolizes the angels' circling of God's throne in heaven.

Those who have made the *hajj* often use the honorific title *hajji*. Many, as demonstrated by this house in Jerusalem, decorate the facade with illustrations to show that the owner has been to Mecca.

## Women and Muslim Family Law

"For Muslim men and women—for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in Charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise—for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward."

—Quran 33:35

If many Muslims speak of Islam as liberating women, others in the West, as in Muslim countries, decry the continuing marginalization and oppression of women. The position of Muslim women must be viewed within the dual historical context of the development of Islamic law and the politics and culture of their Islamic societies. Islamic law itself reflects both the Quranic concern for the rights and protection of women and the family and the traditions of the patriarchal, male-dominated society within which Islamic law was developed.

The Quran introduced reforms affecting the status of women both through new regulations and by teachings that led to the modification of prevailing customs. The Quran recognized a woman's rights to contract marriage, to receive and keep her dowry, and to own and inherit property. No equivalent rights existed in Christianity or in Judaism during or long after the lifetime of the Prophet. In fact, women in the West did not gain inheritance rights until the nineteenth century.

As the Five Pillars are the core of a Muslim's duty to worship God, family law is central to Islam's social laws. Because of the centrality of the community in Islam and the role of the family as the basic unit of society, family law has enjoyed pride of place in the development of Islamic law and in its implementation throughout history. Similarly, though the emergence of modern Muslim states has often seen the adoption of Western-oriented civil and commercial laws or legal systems, in most countries Muslim family law has remained in force. And while in some countries family law has been reformed rather than replaced, often this reform has generated considerable debate. In the 1980s, the resurgence of Islam was often accompanied by attempts to return to the use of classical or medieval family law and to reverse modern reforms. Thus, today, as in the past, the subject of women and the family remains an extremely sensitive issue in Muslim societies.

## *Jihad*: The Struggle for God

*Jihad*, "to strive or struggle," is sometimes referred to as the sixth pillar of Islam, though it has no such official status. In its most general meaning, *jihad* refers to the obligation incumbent on all Muslims, as individuals and as a community, to exert themselves to realize God's will, to lead a virtuous life, to fulfill the universal mission of Islam, and to spread the Islamic community through preaching and converting others. Thus, today it can be used to describe the personal struggle to uphold the Five Pillars and follow the example of the Prophet. Currently, the term is sometimes also used to describe the struggle for educational or social reform—to establish good schools, to clean up a neighborhood, to fight drugs, or to work for social justice. However, *jihad* also includes the struggle for or defense of Islam, or holy war. Although *jihad* is not supposed to include aggressive warfare, this tactic has been invoked by early extremists such as the Kharajites, by rulers to justify their wars of conquest and expansion, and by contemporary extremists such as Osama bin Laden and ISIS as well as other militant organizations in Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, and Indonesia.

The status of women and the family in Muslim family law is the product of many factors that informed the development of Islamic law: patriarchal cultures, Quranic reforms, foreign ideas and values assimilated from conquered peoples, and especially, the interpretation of male jurists in patriarchal societies. Regulations developed in the early centuries of Islamic history regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and bequests have guided Muslim societies, determining attitudes toward women and the family.

The Quran teaches that men and women are equal before God in terms of their religious and moral obligations and rewards (Quran 33:35). In Islamic law, husbands and wives were seen as fulfilling complementary roles. Men in patriarchal societies functioned in the public sphere and were responsible for the financial support and protection of the family. A woman's primary role was that of wife and mother, being responsible for the management of the household, raising her children, and supervising their religious/moral training. In light of women's more sheltered and protected status and men's greater experience in public life and broader responsibilities, the Quran (and Islamic law) teaches that wives are subordinate to husbands (Quran 2:228), and in Islamic law, the testimony of one man is worth that of two women. Similarly, because men in a patriarchal system were responsible for the economic well-being of all women and other dependents in the extended family, the male portion of inheritance was twice that of a female.

Marriage is a primary institution in Islam, regarded as incumbent upon all Muslims. It is a civil contract or covenant, not a sacrament. It safeguards chastity and the growth and stability of the family, legalizing sexual intercourse and the procreation of children. Reflecting the centrality of the family and the identity and role of individual family members, marriage is not simply an agreement between two people but between two families. Thus, marriages arranged by the two families or by a guardian are traditional, though the majority of jurists agreed that a woman should not be forced to marry a man against her will. In practice, however, this was often not the case.

Many non-Muslims are unaware of Quranic reforms affecting women or the differing interpretations of a Quranic text. For example, many equate Islam with polygamy or, more accurately, polygyny (a man having more than one wife). Although the Quran explicitly permits a man to marry four wives, the purpose of this provision was not to discourage all men from practicing monogamy but to afford protection to unmarried women as well as to regulate the rights of men. The same verse (Quran 4:3) notes that, if all wives cannot be supported and treated equally, then only one wife is permitted. Islamic reformers in recent years have used this same spirit and another verse—"You are never able to be fair and just between women if that is your ardent desire" (Quran 4:129)—to argue that the Quranic ideal is monogamy and that plural marriages should be restricted or eliminated. In particular, they note that the original revelation was given to a premodern community in which losses in battle left many widows who needed protection. More importantly, many maintain that the demands of modern life make it extraordinarily difficult for any man to provide equally for more than one wife, especially in terms of time and affection.

Islamic law, reflecting the spirit of the Quran (Quran 4:35) and a saying of the Prophet ("Of all the permitted things divorce is the most abominable"), regards divorce as permissible but reprehensible. One authoritative legal manual calls divorce "a dangerous and disapproved procedure . . . nor is its propriety at all admitted, but on the ground of urgency of relief from an unsuitable wife."[3] Islamic law itself, as if to underscore the seriousness of divorce, prescribes that a man must pronounce the words or formula of divorce three separate times to make it irrevocable. In practice, however, this has not prevented a man from abusing this prescription by declaring the divorce formula three times at once on a single occasion.

The strong influence of custom can be seen in the more limited rights of divorce accorded women. For example, in contrast to men, women had to go to court and present grounds for divorce. In addition, women seeking divorce were limited to charges like physical abuse, abandonment, and failure to provide adequate maintenance. Beginning in the 1920s, some Muslim governments relaxed these and other legal restrictions on women.

Historically, divorce rather than polygyny has proved to be the more serious social problem in Muslim societies, as a woman's Quranic and legal rights to contract and dissolve her own marriage, to receive and control her dowry, or to inherit often disappeared under the pressures of entrenched patriarchal societies. Thus, custom tended to prevail over Islamic law as well as the Quran.

***purdah*:** seclusion of women from men who are not relatives

A well-known example of the interaction of custom and scripture is the veiling and seclusion (***purdah***) of women. These customs, assimilated by Islamic practice from the conquered Persian and Byzantine empires, have been viewed by many (though certainly not all) as appropriate expressions of Quranic principles and values. The Quran does not stipulate the veiling and seclusion of women, though it does say that the wives of the Prophet should speak to men from behind a partition. It tells women to dress and behave modestly (Quran 24:30–31), but the admonition applies to men as well.

Veiling and seclusion have varied considerably across Muslim societies and in different historical periods. Originally, veiling was meant to protect women in upper-class urban surroundings, where they enjoyed mobility and opportunities to socialize. Village and rural women were slower to adopt the measure, which interfered with their ability to work in the fields.

Over the centuries, as the practices of veiling and seclusion spread, there were negative effects on the status of women. The institution of *purdah* cut off many women's access to the mosque, the social and educational center of the community. This isolation further lowered their status. Poorer women were often restricted to small houses with limited social contacts, and this has continued into modern times. The twentieth-century religious scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996) said: "Ninety percent of our women do not pray at all; nor do they know of the other duties of Islam other than their names."[4]

In many Muslim societies today, debate rages about the status and character of "the Muslim woman." Greater opportunities for women's education and employment

have generated calls to reform the inequities of some Muslim laws that affect women only. Modernizing governments since the 1920s have reformed Muslim family laws in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. These reforms have included measures that restricted a male's right to unilaterally divorce his wife as well as to practice polygyny. In fact, a wife was permitted to specify in her marriage contract that a husband must obtain her permission before taking another wife. A wife's grounds for divorce were increased as well. These reforms were only partial, however, and were imposed from above through legislation. And they were often resisted or reluctantly accepted by the *ulama*. But with the more recent resurgence of Islam, more conservative or traditional religious forces have rejected family law reforms as Western inspired, calling instead for a return to classical Islamic laws and seeking again to limit and control women's role in society.

## The Interior Path of Love: Islamic Mysticism

Alongside the path of law (*sharia*) is the interior path or way (*tariqa*) of Sufi mysticism, a major, popular religious movement within Sunni and Shiah Islam. Whereas the *sharia* described the duties and rights that order the individual and community, Sufism offered an esoteric path or spiritual discipline. The Sufi method sought not only to follow God but also to experience God's presence.

Islamic mysticism, like Islamic law, began as a reform movement. Having successfully united the tribes of Arabia and conquered the Byzantine and Persian empires, the *ummah* entered a new phase in its development. In their capital, Damascus, the Umayyad caliphs established an imperial court characterized by material luxuries. Pious Muslims increasingly saw these changes as evidence that God and submission to God's will were being replaced in the courts of dynastic rulers by concerns for power and wealth. To counter this trend, critics began to study the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet, and the performance of religious duties, reemphasizing the centrality of God over worship of the material world and its rewards.

***Sufism*:** Islamic mysticism

The term ***Sufism*** comes from the coarse woolen garment (*suf*, "wool") worn by many of these early ascetics. The reformers did not reject the world so much as dependence on the things of the world. Desiring a more faithful return to the purity and simplicity of the Prophet's time, Sufi men and women practiced self-denial and good works. The **Sufis** were known for detachment from the material world, repentance for sins, fear of God and the Last Judgment, and selfless devotion to the fulfillment of God's will.

**Sufis:** Muslim mystics

Early emphasis on ascetic detachment and meditation was complemented by the fusion of asceticism with an undying devotional love of God as exemplified by Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. 801). This joining of the ascetic with the ecstatic permanently influenced the nature and future development of Sufism. An attractive woman, Rabia declined offers of marriage, not willing to permit anyone or anything to distract her

Turkish Sufi order (Mawlawi Tariqah), founded by Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), one of the most famous Sufi mystics. These men are popularly known as *whirling dervishes* because of one of their meditation rituals, a dance in which they revolve to the music of Sufi songs.

from total commitment to God. Nothing captures better her selfless devotion than the following words attributed to her:

> O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in hell, and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty.[5]

Over the years, a variety of ascetic and ritual practices were adopted as part of the mystic way, including fasting, poverty, silence, and celibacy. Among the Sufi techniques to experience the presence of God are rhythmic repetition of God's name, breathing exercises that focus consciousness on God, and the use of music and dance to show devotion to God and Muhammad. The best-known use of dance is that of Turkey's whirling dervishes, who circle their master to imitate the divinely ordained motions of the universe.

One popular practice of Sufism is the veneration of Muhammad and Sufi saints as intermediaries between God and humanity. Despite the official Islamic belief that Muhammad was only a human being and did not work miracles, over the centuries stories arose of the Prophet's extraordinary powers. In Sufism, these stories were extended to Sufi saints, called the friends (***wali***) or protégés of God, who are said to perform such miracles as curing the sick, multiplying food, and reading minds. The burial sites or mausoleums of Sufi masters became religious sanctuaries visited by pilgrims.

***wali***: Sufi term referring to a saint

Although Sufi spirituality complemented the more ritual and legalistic orientation of the *ulama* and the *sharia*, the relationship between the two was often tense. The *ulama*

tended to regard Sufi masters and the mystic way as a challenge to their authority and their interpretation of Islam. Sufis tended to regard the *ulama*'s legalistic approach to Islam as lesser, incomplete, and subordinate to the Sufi way. The majority of the *ulama* reacted to these challenges to their authority and worldview by condemning Islamic mysticism in the name of Islamic orthodoxy. And at this critical juncture, a prominent eleventh-century Islamic scholar, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, emerged to reconcile the tensions.

Al-Ghazali spent many years practicing and studying Sufism in Arabia and Palestine. His great work, *The Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, argued that law, theology, and mysticism were neither incompatible nor inconsistent with one another. This reassured the *ulama* about the orthodoxy of Sufism. In al-Ghazali's great synthesis, law and theology were presented in terms that the *ulama* could accept, but they were grounded in religious experience and interior devotion (Sufism). Al-Ghazali reconciled the *ulama* and the Sufis, earning him the title "Renewer (***mujaddid***) of Islam." While the tension between many of the *ulama* and Sufism continued, Sufism in the twelfth century and later swept across much of the Islamic world. Sufi orders became the great missionaries of Islam, and Sufism became integral to everyday popular religious practice and spirituality.

These adherents of the Sufi Naqshbandi order at the Islamic Institute in Cairo represent one of the major mystical orders in Islam. Not only did they play an important role in reformist and anticolonialist movements throughout the Islamic world in the past, they also do so today.

In modern times, some religious conservatives and reformers have remained critics of Sufism, despite its widespread popularity. Extremists like ISIS have even gone so far as to destroy historic Sufi shrines.

***mujaddid*:** "renewer"; one who comes to restore and revitalize Islamic community and practice

## Islam and the State

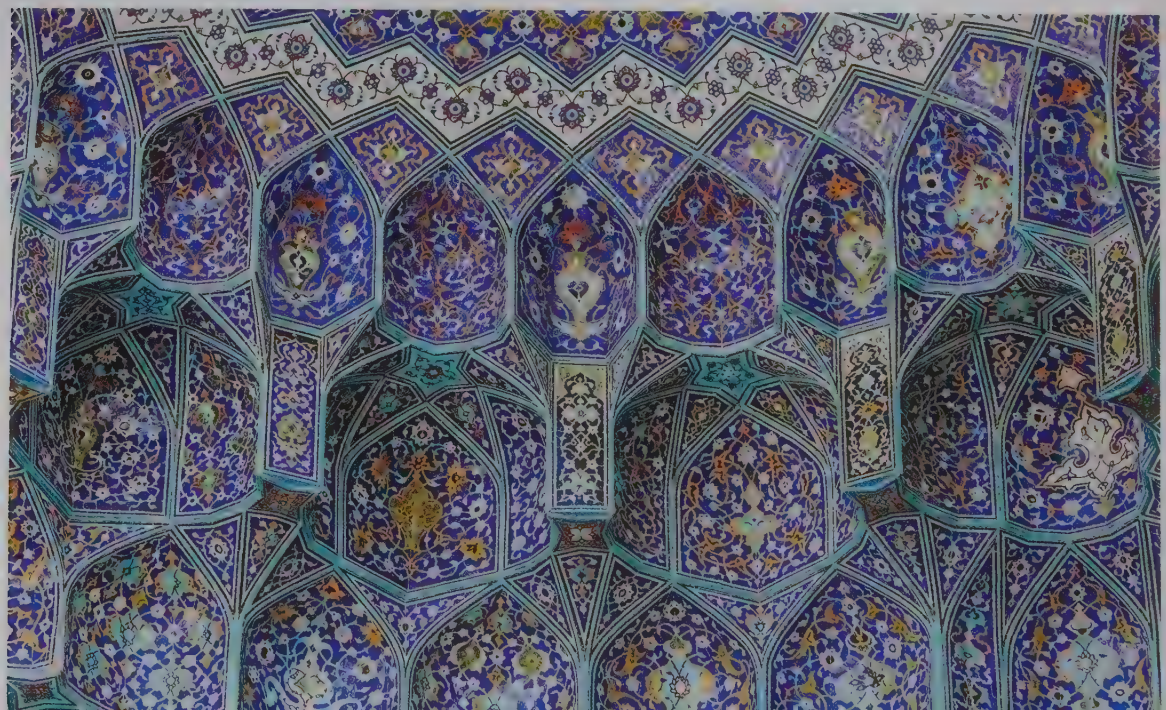
As we have seen, the early success of Islamic empires influenced the development of Islamic law and mysticism. From Muhammad's establishment of the first Muslim community at Medina in 622, the soldiers, traders, and Sufis of Islam spread God's word and rule, creating a vast region of Islam (***dar al-Islam***). The Caliphate, with its centralized Islamic empires, the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258)

***dar al-Islam*:** territory controlled and ruled by Muslims

dynasties, was followed by Muslim sultanates extending from Timbuktu in Africa to Mindanao in Southeast Asia. During this period, great Muslim empires also emerged: the Ottoman in the Middle East (1281–1924), the Safavid (1501–1722) in Iran, and the Mughal (1483–1857) in South Asia.

However different these empires and sultanate states were, Islam constituted the basis of their political and social life. Religion informed the state's political, legal, educational, and social institutions. The caliph or sultan, as head of state, was seen as the political successor of Muhammad. Although not a prophet, he was the protector of the faith who was to implement Islamic law and to spread Islamic rule. The *ulama* were the guardians of religion, its interpreters, and as such often served as advisers to caliphs and sultans. While not ordained clergy, they were a major intellectual and social force in society, and they played a primary role in the state's religious, legal, educational, and social service institutions. The *ulama* were theologians and legal experts, responsible for the application of the law and the administration of *sharia* courts. They ran the schools and universities that trained those who aspired to public as well as religious office. They administered funds for a range of services, from the construction and maintenance of mosques, schools, student hostels, and hospitals to roads and bridges. In time, they came to constitute a religious establishment alongside, and often dependent on, the political establishment. Indeed, in many empires, the ruler appointed a senior religious leader, *Shaykh-al-Islam*, as head of religious affairs, a post that still exists in many Muslim countries today.

In an Islamic state, citizenship was also based on religious affiliation. Muslims were full citizens, enjoying all the rights and duties of this position. As discussed



Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque in Isfahan, Iran, completed in 1618, is one of the architectural masterpieces of Safavid Iranian architecture.

earlier, Jews and Christians, as People of the Book, were also citizens, but they had the status of protected people (*dhimmī*). Islam also informed the international relations of the state. The spread of Islam as a faith and a religiopolitical system was legitimated by the Quran and by the teaching and example of Muhammad. Diplomacy, persuasion and preaching, force, and political alliances were all employed to accomplish this goal.

The obligation to strive (*jihad*) to realize God's will included an armed struggle to defend Islam or the community and to spread Muslim rule. As such, *jihad* became part of Islam's doctrine of war and peace. As Islamic empires spread, non-Muslims could pick one of three options: (1) convert to Islam, (2) become "protected people" (*dhimmī*) and pay a poll tax, or (3) become enemies to be fought.

For the believer, the role of Islam in state and society reflected the continuum of Muslim rule, power, and success from the time of the Prophet Muhammad to the dawn of European colonialism. This continuity of an Islamic ideology and system reinforced the purpose and mission of a divinely guided community. As a result, Sunni Muslim history contains the belief that following the Islamic community's divine mandate to spread God's guidance and governance will lead to prosperity and power in this life as well as the promise of eternal life in heaven. The rapid spread of Islam as a dynamic faith and imperial power, however, was regarded as a theological and political threat to Christendom, epitomized by the launching of the Crusades.

The Taj Mahal, the mausoleum built (1631–1647) by the grief-stricken emperor Shah Jahan for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in childbirth. Situated in a forty-two-acre garden, it is flanked by two perfectly proportioned mosque complexes. This crowning achievement, a landmark of world architecture, symbolizes the wealth and splendor of the Mughal Empire. The project brought together craftsmen and calligraphers from the Islamic world who worked with Muslim and Hindu craftsmen from the empire.

## Islam and the West (Christendom): The Crusades

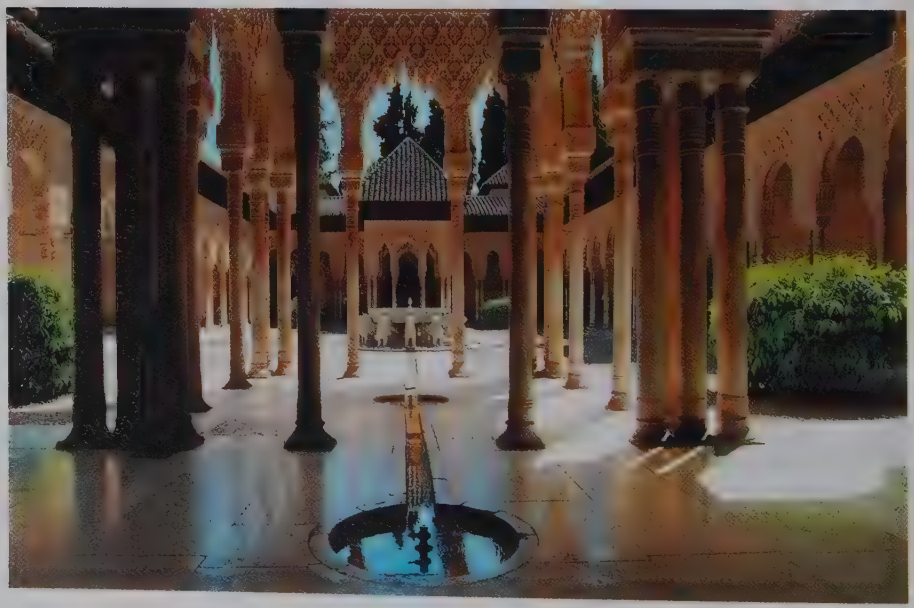
Despite common religious roots and instances of cooperation, the history of Islam and Western Christendom has been marked more by confrontation than by peaceful coexistence. For the Christian West, Islam is seen as the religion of the sword; for many Muslims, the Christian West was epitomized first by the Crusades and centuries later by European colonialism.

Unlike Judaism or any other world religion, Islam constituted an effective theological and political challenge to Christendom and its ambitions. From the seventh to the eleventh centuries, Muslim armies overran the Byzantine Empire, Spain, and the Mediterranean, from Sicily to Anatolia. At the same time, Islam challenged Christian religious authority. Appropriating Christianity's insistence that the New Testament describes a new covenant and revelation superseding that of the Jews, Muslims now claimed that God, due to the corruption of the original revelations to Jews and Christians (e.g., the Christian doctrine that Jesus was in fact the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity), had sent down his final and complete revelation, the Quran, to Muhammad. Muslims, like Christians before them, now also claimed to have a divinely mandated, universal mission to call all to Islam. Christianity and Islam, theologically and politically, were on a collision course.

By the eleventh century, Christendom's response to Islam was twofold. The first response was the struggle to reconquer Andalusian Spain (1000–1492), where the coexistence of Muslims, Christians, and Jews had produced a vibrant culture. The second was the Crusades (1095–1453).

Jerusalem had been taken by Arab armies in 638. Thereafter, for five centuries, Muslims lived in peaceful coexistence with Christians and with Jews. Although banned by Christian rulers, Jews were permitted by Muslims to return to live and worship in Jerusalem. However, in the eleventh century, political events that pitted Christendom against Islam began a period of distrust, which continues to the current day.

In 1071, the Byzantine emperor Alexius I, whose army had been decisively defeated by a Seljuq (Abbasid) army, feared that all Asia Minor would be overrun.



Courtyard of the Lions, Alhambra Palace, the fourteenth-century residence of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada, Spain, one of the remarkable monuments remaining from the several centuries of Muslim rule in Andalusia, when Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted and produced a high culture.

He called on other Christian rulers and the pope to come to the aid of his capital, Constantinople, by undertaking a "pilgrimage," or crusade, to free Jerusalem and its surrounding area from Muslim rule. For the leader of the Western church, Pope Urban II, Jerusalem provided an opportunity to gain recognition of papal authority. In addition, Christian rulers, knights, and merchants were driven by the promise of booty as well as potential trade and banking opportunities if a Latin kingdom was established in the Middle East. This enthusiastic response to Alexius united Christendom in a holy war against the "infidel," ostensibly to liberate Jerusalem.

Few events have had a more shattering effect on Muslim–Christian relations than the Crusades. Western perceptions of the Crusades are shaped by three myths:

- Muslims were the antagonists
- Christendom triumphed
- the sole purpose of the Crusades was to liberate Jerusalem

In fact, the Crusades were launched by Urban II, who called upon all European Christians to a war against Muslims to reclaim the Holy Land with the battle cry "God wills it!" For Christian rulers and their armies, reasons to engage in the Crusades were political and economic (as well as religious for some). The focus was on recapturing territories that had formerly been Christian.

For Muslims, the collective memory of the Crusades lives on as an example of the aggression and imperialism of the Christian West and a reminder of Christianity's early hostility toward Islam. While Muslims remember July 15, 1099, when the Christian crusaders conquered Jerusalem and massacred all its Jewish and Muslim inhabitants, as an episode of horrific violence, European Christian monks hailed it as the greatest event in world history since the crucifixion of Christ. Muslims contrast that massacre with the later actions of Salah al-Din (Saladin), the great Muslim general, who in reconquering Jerusalem in 1187 spared noncombatants.

By the fifteenth century, the Crusades ended, having failed in their supposed aim to unite Christendom and turn back Muslim armies. Amid a bitterly divided Christian world, the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, fell in 1453 to Muslim armies, was renamed Istanbul, and became the seat of the Ottoman Empire. What actually happened during the Crusades is less important than the diverse ways in which this bitter history has been remembered and its legacy down through the ages to today.

Understanding Islam today requires an appreciation of key historical events from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries as well as of the causes and nature of premodern and modern reform movements. Sacred texts and long-held religious beliefs, combined with the specific sociopolitical contexts of Muslim communities, have been critical factors in producing a diversity of Muslim experiences and interpretations of Islam.

## Premodern Revivalist Movements

From the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, the Islamic world witnessed a period of upheaval and renewal. In many countries, Muslim societies, already threatened by European colonialism, failed and declined for internal reasons. Such crises sparked responses from religious and social/political revivalist movements across the Islamic world. Although their political and socioeconomic conditions varied, all revivalist movements were concerned about religious, political, and social disintegration, and all were convinced that the solution lay in a renewal of the Islamic way of life.

Islamic revivalist movements draw on a long tradition of revival and reform. Islamic revival and reform involve a call for a return to the fundamentals, the Quran and Sunnah, and the right to interpret (*ijtihad*, or use of independent judgment) these primary sources of Islam.

***Mahdi:*** "divinely guided one" who is expected to appear at the end of time to usher in a perfect Islamic society of peace and social justice

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this belief took on popular religious forms. While such Islamic revivalists claimed to return to the original teachings of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, in fact each one produced new religious interpretations and cultural syntheses. The Wahhabi movement in Arabia and the Mahdiyya in Africa are perhaps the best known of the post-medieval revivalists. Each exerted a formative influence on modern Muslim states: the Wahhabi in what is now Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the Mahdist in Sudan.

A religious leader, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), and a local tribal chief, Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765), joined forces to produce a united, militant religiopolitical movement. Abd al-Wahhab was dismayed by the condition of his society, which he saw as having degenerated to that of pre-Islamic Arabia, a period of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) of Islam. He was appalled by such popular religious practices as the veneration of Sufi saints, which he believed compromised the unity or oneness of God, and he was very critical of the Islamic community in Arabia, which had fallen back into tribalism and tribal warfare. He condemned some devotional rituals as idolatry, the worst sin in Islam, and dismissed others as pagan superstitions. Abd al-Wahhab wished to purify Islam from all foreign, un-Islamic practices. And the Wahhabi movement waged a rigorous holy war to subdue and unite the tribes of Arabia. Muslims in opposition were declared enemies of God who must be fought. Unlike other revivalist movements, the Wahhabi chose to completely suppress rather than merely reform Sufism.

Geometric design plays a major role in Islamic art. Artists use circles, triangles, hexagons, and squares to create ornate patterns to express and reinforce the unity of the Islamic world vision. This striking illustration comes from a Moroccan Quran tablet.

The Mahdi of the Sudan, on the other hand, was a charismatic Sufi leader who initiated a militant, reformist religiopolitical movement. The founder of the Mahdiyya order, whose name was Muhammad Ahmad, proclaimed himself ***Mahdi*** ("divinely guided one") in 1881. Thus, he went beyond most other revivalist reformers who claimed the right to interpret Islam and instead said that he was a divinely appointed representative of God.

The Mahdi established an Islamic community by uniting his followers. He also justified waging holy war against other Muslims, declaring Sudan's

Ottoman Muslim rulers to be infidels. During this period, Sufism was reformed, and alcohol, prostitution, gambling, and music were outlawed. After a four-year struggle, Mahdist forces overcame Egyptian forces of the Ottoman Empire, and an Islamic state was established in Khartoum in 1885.

## Islam and Modernity

By the nineteenth century, the decline of Muslim societies made them vulnerable to European imperialism, which ultimately did much to shape the modern Muslim world politically, economically, religiously, and culturally. When Europe overpowered North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, reducing most Muslim societies to colonies, many Muslims experienced these defeats not just as political and cultural setbacks, but as a religious crisis as well.

Colonialism brought European armies and Christian missionaries, who attributed their conquests not only to their military and economic power but also to the superiority of Western civilization and the truth inherent in Christianity. The French spoke of a "mission to civilize" and the British of "the white man's burden." Thus, the missionaries who accompanied the armies of bureaucrats, soldiers, traders, and teachers were quick to spread the message about the superiority of Christian religion and civilization.

Muslim responses to Europe's political/religious dominance varied, ranging from resistance or warfare in "defense of Islam" to accommodation to (and selective assimilation of) Western institutions and values. Some advocated following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who in the face of persecution in Mecca chose to emigrate from Mecca to Medina and later to fight. However, the military defense of Islam and Muslim territory was futile against the large, modernized weapons of superior European forces. Emigration to a "safe, independent" Muslim territory was impossible for most.

Many Muslim rulers were attracted to what they believed were the sources of European power and success: Western knowledge, science, and technology. Their goal was the development of modernized societies with modern militaries. Students were sent to study in the West, and political, economic, and educational institutions, based on European models, were created in many parts of the Muslim world. As a result, a modern Muslim elite quickly emerged.

These elites, intellectually and culturally influenced by the West, regarded the traditional Muslim religious establishments as relics of the past, incapable of responding to the demands of modern society. Most advocated a Western secular model of development and the adoption, or at least adaptation, of Western political, legal, economic, educational, and social institutions.

## Islamic Modernism

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Islamic reformers sought to bridge the gap between conservative religious leaders and modernizing secular elites. Reformers developed an Islamic rationale for the reinterpretation of Islamic doctrine and law and the adaptation of modern ideas, science, technology, and institutions. Declaring Islam to be a religion of reason, science, and progress, reformers called on Muslims to reclaim the beliefs, attitudes, and values that had previously contributed to powerful Islamic empires and flourishing Islamic civilizations.

Islamic modernism challenged both the leadership and doctrines of the conservative religious establishments, rejecting blind acceptance of the authority of the past. Many of these reformers were not traditionally trained religious scholars but modern, educated "laymen" who claimed the right to interpret and reinterpret Islam. They repudiated the authority of the *ulama* as the sole "keepers of Islam" as well as the tradition that the *ulama*'s legal doctrines and interpretations were binding.

The rationale of Islamic modernism was based on a two-part understanding of Islamic law: divinely revealed laws and values derived from those laws. Reformers saw the latter as products of human reason and custom, developed to meet specific social and historical needs. Thus, modernists distinguished between the unchanging laws of God, such as those governing prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, and social legislation or regulations that were capable of change.

Islamic modernism remained primarily attractive to the intellectual elite. It provided the precedent for adapting "modern" ideas and institutions (from the nation-state and parliamentary government to women's education) as well as the notion that those qualified to interpret Islam extended beyond the *ulama*. It failed to produce a systematic reinterpretation of Islam, however, or to develop effective organizations to spread and implement its message. These shortcomings contributed to the emergence of revivalist activist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Society) in South Asia.

## Modern Islamic Revivalist Movements

The presence of Europe in the Muslim world, and the seeming failure of reformers to block Western political and cultural influence, led to two major Islamic revivalist movements in the Middle East and South Asia during the 1930s: the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami. Their trailblazers, Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) of the Brotherhood and Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979) of the Jamaat have had an incalculable impact on the development of Islamic movements throughout the Muslim world to the present day. The worldviews of both

movements are based on an interpretation of Islam that informed social and political activism. Their founders are the architects of contemporary Islamic revivalism, men whose ideas and methods have been studied and emulated by scholars and activists from the Sudan to Indonesia.

Hassan al-Banna established the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928, and Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi, a journalist, organized the Jamaat-i-Islami in India in 1941. Both leaders combined traditional Islamic educational backgrounds with knowledge of modern Western thought. Believing that their societies were dominated by and dependent on the West, both al-Banna and Mawdudi posited an "Islamic alternative" to conservative religious leaders as well as to Western-oriented Islamic and secular, modern elites. The *ulama* were regarded as outmoded, a religious class whose fossilized Islam and co-optation by governments held back the Islamic community. Modernists, on the other hand, were seen as having been influenced by blind or uncritical admiration for the West.

The Brotherhood and the Jamaat proclaimed Islam to be a self-sufficient, all-encompassing way of life, an ideological alternative to Western capitalism and Marxism. Joining thought to action, these movements provided Islamic responses to such issues as how best to respond to European colonialism and to revitalize the Muslim community. In contrast to Islamic modernists, who justified adopting Western ideas and institutions because they were compatible with Islam, al-Banna and Mawdudi sought to produce new interpretations using Islamic sources. For these men, the cultural influence of the West threatened the very identity and survival of Islam and the Muslim community and, in the long run, was even more dangerous than its political intervention.

Although they opposed Westernization, the Brotherhood and the Jamaat were not against all forms of modernization. They provided modern educational and social welfare services, and they used modern technology and mass communications to spread their message and mobilize popular support. And that message, though rooted in Islamic sources, was created for a twentieth-century audience. It addressed the political and social problems of modernity as seen through their Muslim eyes and interpretations of Islam. Both organizations recruited followers from mosques, schools, universities, and society: students, workers, merchants, and young professionals, primarily city dwellers from the lower middle and middle classes. The goal was to produce a new generation of modern, educated, but Islamically oriented political and social leaders.

Al-Banna and Mawdudi advocated a process of reform rather than violent political revolution. To establish an Islamic state required first the Islamization of society through a gradual process of social change. Both the Brotherhood and the Jamaat maintained that Muslims should not look to Western capitalism or communism, and argued that faith in the West was misplaced. They observed that Western democracy had itself contributed to authoritarianism, economic exploitation, corruption, and social injustice. Further, they believed that Western secularism and its separation of religion and the state would be responsible for the ultimate downfall

## RITUALS AND RITES: Ideological Origins/Worldview of Islamic Revivalism

Despite differences, Hassan al-Banna and Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi shared the following ideological worldview based on a historical tradition that has inspired and guided many contemporary reform movements:

1. Islam is a comprehensive way of life, a total, all-embracing ideology for personal and public life, for state and society.
2. The Quran, God's revelation, and the example (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad are its foundations.
3. Islamic law (the *sharia*, the "path" of God), based on the Quran and Sunnah, is the sacred blueprint for Muslim life.
4. Fidelity to the Muslim's vocation to reestablish God's sovereignty or rule through implementation of God's law results in success, power, and wealth of the Islamic community (*ummah*) in this life as well as eternal reward in the next.
5. Muslim societies fail and become subservient to others because they have strayed from God's divinely revealed path, following the secular, materialistic ideologies and values of the West or of the East—capitalism or Marxism.
6. Restoration of Muslim pride, identity, power, and rule (the past glory of Islamic empires and civilization) requires a return to Islam, the reimplementation of God's law, and the acceptance of God's guidance for state and society.
7. Science and technology must be harnessed and used within an Islamically oriented and guided context to avoid the Westernization and secularization of Muslim society.

of the West. Finally, the Brotherhood maintained that years of Arab subservience had not prevented the West from betraying Arabs by supporting the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

### Radical Islam

The Muslim Brotherhood had a confrontation with the Egyptian state in the late 1950s and 1960s that caused a group within the movement to become more militant and radicalized. The chief architect of this transformation, Sayyid Qutb, recast the ideological beliefs of Hassan al-Banna and Mawlana Mawdudi into a revolutionary call to arms. A devout Muslim, Qutb had memorized the Quran as a child. And like many young intellectuals of the time, he studied Western literature and grew up an admirer of the West. Qutb was a prolific writer and an active participant in contemporary literary and social debates.

In 1949, Qutb traveled to the United States to study educational organization. Although he had come to the United States out of admiration, Qutb's experiences convinced him that the sexual permissiveness, moral decadence, and anti-Arab bias,

which he perceived in US government and media support for Israel, had corrupted all of Western civilization. Shortly after his return to Egypt in 1951, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood.

During the 1950s, Qutb emerged as a major voice of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially influential among the younger, more militant members. Government crackdown on the Brotherhood and Qutb's imprisonment (1954–1964) and torture increased his radicalization. He took the ideas of al-Banna and Mawdudi to a militant, radical, and revolutionary conclusion.

Qutb regarded Egypt and other Muslim authoritarian governments as repressive and anti-Islamic. Society was divided into two camps, the party of God and the party of Satan, those committed to the rule of God and those opposed to it. There was no middle ground between the forces of good and of evil. Qutb advocated the creation of a group of true Muslims within the broader, corrupted society. He further maintained that the creation of an Islamic system of government was a divine commandment. Given the authoritarianism of many regimes, Qutb concluded that government reform was impossible, and that *jihad* as armed struggle was the only way to implement a new Islamic order. Islam, he declared, stood on the brink of disaster, threatened by repressive anti-Islamic governments and the neocolonialism of the West and the East. Qutb went beyond his predecessors when he declared Muslim elites and governments as enemies of God, against whom all true believers should wage holy war. Many later radical groups, including al-Qaeda and ISIS, have adopted Qutb's critique of Muslim rulers as necessitating the violent overthrow of un-Islamic systems of government.

In 1966, Qutb and several other Muslim Brotherhood leaders were executed. The Egyptian government attempted to purge and destroy the Brotherhood as a whole, not just Qutb and his followers. Thousands of Brothers were arrested and tortured, while others went underground or fled the country. Many concluded that the Brotherhood had been totally crushed, a prediction that was to prove false a decade later.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of Hassan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutb on contemporary Islamic movements. Combining religiopolitical activism with social protest or reform, contemporary movements range from moderate groups that function within society to violent extremists and terrorists, from selective criticism of the West to rejection and attacks on all that the West stands for. Indeed, these movements reflect the multiple issues facing Muslims in their struggle to determine the relationship of Islam to modern state and society:

- countering Western political and cultural dominance
- dealing with the challenges of modernity to Islamic belief
- redefining Islam and its relevance to modern life and society
- addressing the clash of cultures not only between the West and the Muslim world but also within Muslim societies over religious and national identity and development.

# Islam and Postmodern Trends in a Postcolonial World

## The Impact of the Islamic Resurgence

Since the late 1960s, the Muslim world has experienced a contemporary resurgence of Islam. New Islamic governments or republics were established in Iran, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Rulers, political parties, and opposition movements have used Islam to attract supporters. Islamic activists have led governments in Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia; served in cabinets and in elected parliaments; and filled senior positions in professional associations. At the same time, a small number of militant extremist and terrorist organizations, in Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, have engaged in violence and terrorism to topple governments or achieve related goals. Extremists, like al-Qaeda and ISIS, have left a legacy of kidnapping, hijacking, bombing, and murder from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States. Understanding this phenomenon requires an awareness of its roots. What were the causes and conditions that led to the contemporary resurgence of Islam?

## Islamic Fundamentalism

The reassertion of Islam in Muslim politics and society has often been referred to in the West as the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. However, the term *fundamentalism* has no origin or history in Islam and Islamic tradition. The word was coined and used by a group of British and American Protestant Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in reaction to a theological liberalism and modernism that revised traditional Christian beliefs. Since the 1980s, it has been associated with the rise of the Christian Religious Right, conservative evangelical Protestants.

Thus, the phrase "Islamic fundamentalism" can be misleading when it is used to describe Islam, Islamic activists, and Muslim countries. It has often been used indiscriminately and pejoratively by journalists, politicians, and some Christian fundamentalist leaders and applied as a catch-all phrase for diverse and even contradictory interpretations of Islam and movements. Yet the ranks of so-called Islamic fundamentalists include mainstream as well as violent religious extremist movements. The majority of Islamic activists have worked through movements and political parties within the electoral process and provided much-needed services to the poor through Islamic schools, medical clinics, social welfare agencies, and other nongovernmental institutions. At the same time, militant extremists and movements like al-Qaeda and ISIS try to reach their goals through violence and terrorism.

Similarly, diverse governments and parties, like the conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia, the radical socialist state of Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, the clerically governed Islamic Republic of Iran, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the AKP government in Turkey, and the Renaissance Party (or simply Ennahda, a self-defined "Muslim democratic" political party) in Tunisia, have all been described as "fundamentalist." Yet this description fails to take into account vast differences in these governments and their policies. In recent years, many scholars and political analysts have preferred to use the terms *political Islam* or *Islamism,* rather than *fundamentalism,* when discussing Islam's many-faceted roles in current social and political movements.

## Islam in Modern State and Society

A map of the modern Muslim world offers a visual explanation for the upheaval in Muslim societies. During the twentieth century, modern nation-states, carved out by European colonial powers after World War I, replaced former Islamic empires and sultanates. By World War II, most of these newly designated states had won their independence, but the new rulers had been placed on their thrones by their former colonizers. Moreover, Westernized elites introduced or imposed European culture and values in many Muslim societies. As a result, issues of government legitimacy as well as national and cultural identity remained unresolved. During the Cold War, the stability of many rulers was due to their military and security forces and the support (financial and military) of Western or Soviet allies rather than widespread political participation and empowerment.

Once these modern nation-states had been created in the Muslim world, it was expected that they would generally follow a secular path of development. And outwardly, this seemed to be the general case. Saudi Arabia was created in 1932 and proclaimed itself an Islamic state, but most new nations adopted or adapted Western political, legal, social, economic, and educational institutions and values. Turkey, for example, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923, suppressed Islamic institutions, banned Islamic dress and Islamic law, and transplanted Western secular laws and institutions to create its own version of a secular state.

Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, however, created what may be called "Muslim states." In these and most other countries of the Islamic world, the majority populations are Muslim, but Western-inspired institutions (e.g., parliaments, educational systems, and banks) have been generally adopted. Western dress, culture, and entertainment became pervasive among the wealthy and powerful in urban centers.

Throughout the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, progress and prosperity in Muslim societies were regarded as dependent on the degree to which Muslims and their societies were "modern." The degree of progress and success for individuals, cities, and governments was measured in terms of conformity to Western standards and values. Based on these criteria, Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and

Iran were often seen as among the more modern, advanced, and "enlightened"—that is, Westernized and secular—countries. Saudi Arabia, the states of the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan were generally regarded as more traditional, religiously conservative, and thus "backward."

## The Failure of Modernity and the Islamic Revival

The late 1960s and 1970s shattered the hopes of many who believed that national independence and Western-oriented development would usher in strong states and prosperous societies. The crises of many Muslim societies at this time proved a powerful catalyst for a religious resurgence and revival. The realities of many Muslim societies raised questions of national identity and the political legitimacy of rulers as well as of religious faith and meaning. Such pervasive conditions as poverty, illiteracy, failed economies, high unemployment, and unequal distribution of wealth could not be blamed entirely on Western influences.

The signs of these profound problems would not become fully appreciated in the West until the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979. There were previews, however, during the preceding decade: the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, the Malay–Chinese riots in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, the Pakistan–Bangladesh civil war of 1971 in which East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and Lebanon's civil war of the mid-1970s. Such catalytic events triggered a soul-searching reassessment among many Muslims, who saw the return of Islam as a domestic and international political force as signaling a return of God's guidance and favor. However, the fall of the Shah of Iran and an *ulama*-led revolution in that country were as threatening for many Sunni Muslim governments and elites (especially those in majority Shiah Gulf states like Iraq and Bahrain's as well as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait with their significant Shiah minorities) as these events were to Western observers.

Perhaps the most significant symbolic event that sparked Arab and Muslim dissatisfaction was the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, the Six-Day War. Israel defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan in a "preemptive" strike, which the Israeli government claimed was necessary to counter a planned Arab attack. The Arabs experienced a massive loss of territory: Sinai, Gaza, the West Bank, and in particular, Jerusalem, the third-holiest city (after Mecca and Medina) of Islam. Muslim loss of Jerusalem in the 1967 war was a traumatic experience, which made Palestine and the Arab–Israeli conflict not just an Arab Muslim and Arab Christian issue but a worldwide Islamic issue. Many who asked what had gone wrong in their societies also wanted to know why Israel had been able to defeat the combined Arab forces. Were the weakness and failure of Muslim societies due to their faith? Was Islam incompatible with modernity and thus the cause of Arab backwardness and impotence? Had God abandoned the Muslims?

As we have seen, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, internal threats to Muslim societies were followed by the external threat of European

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a major holy site and place of pilgrimage erected by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, was completed in 692. The famous shrine is built on the spot from which Muslims believe Muhammad ascended to God and then returned to the world. In this story, one of the grand themes of Islamic scholarship and popular piety, the Prophet, in the company of the angel Gabriel, was transported at night from the Kaaba in Mecca to Jerusalem. From there, he ascended to the heavens and the presence of God.

colonialism. The mid-twentieth century, however, was a period of independence and Muslim self-rule. The failures of the "modern experiment" led many to a more authentic, indigenous alternative to modern nationalism and socialism. Despite significant differences from one country to the next, many Muslims worldwide sought an Islamic alternative to Western capitalism and Soviet Marxism. In this context, Islam became a rallying cry for political organization and mass mobilization.

## The Religious Worldview of Contemporary Islamic Activism

Islamic activists shared the following beliefs or points of ideology:

1. Islam, a comprehensive way of life, is and must be integral to politics and society.
2. The failures of Muslim societies were caused by departing from the path of Islam and depending on Western secularism, which separates religion and politics.
3. Muslims must return to the Quran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad and reintroduce Islamic laws.
4. Modern development must be guided by Islamic values rather than those that would lead to Westernization and secularization of society.

As Islamic symbols, slogans, ideology, leaders, and organizations became prominent fixtures in Muslim politics, religion was increasingly used both by governments and by reform as well as opposition movements to enhance their legitimacy and to mobilize popular support. Islamic movements and organizations sprang up across the Muslim world. A variety of opposition movements appealed to Islam: In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini led the "Islamic revolution" of 1979–1980; militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, calling for the overthrow of the Saudi government; religious extremists assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981. At the same time, Afghan freedom fighters (*mujahideen*, "holy warriors") in the late 1970s and early 1980s led a successful resistance movement against the Soviet Union's invasion and occupation.

The leadership of most Islamic organizations (particularly Sunni groups) was and remains outside the control of the *ulama*. Many leaders have degrees in modern science, medicine, law, engineering, computer science, and education. While the majority of Islamic organizations work within the system, a minority of violent extremists insists that Muslim rulers are anti-Islamic and that violence and revolution are the only way to liberate society and impose an Islamic way of life.

## From the Periphery to Mainstream Politics and Society

The 1980s were dominated by fear of "radical Islamic fundamentalism," embodied in Iran's announced desire to export its "Islamic fundamentalist revolution" and the activities of clandestine extremist groups. Feeding these fears were disturbances by Shiah in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain; Iran's strong backing of a Lebanese Shiah group Hezbollah, which emerged in response to the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon; and a series of hijackings, kidnappings, and bombings of Western embassies.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was increasingly clear that a nonviolent, "quiet revolution" had taken place in many parts of the Muslim world. Islamic revivalism and activism had in many contexts become institutionalized in mainstream society. Islamically inspired social and political activism produced schools, clinics and hospitals, and social service agencies, such as day care, legal aid, and youth centers. Private mosques were established alongside those controlled by governments, and financial institutions such as Islamic banks and insurance companies appeared. In addition, an alternative elite, consisting of modern-educated but Islamically (rather than secularly) oriented professionals, emerged. By the mid-1990s, Islamic activists could be found in the cabinets and parliaments of many countries and in the leadership of professional organizations.

## CONTRASTING RELIGIOUS VISIONS

As the following contrasting visions indicate, every religious tradition is capable of generating both visions that encourage peace and understanding and visions that encourage conflict and violence.

### Muhammad Iqbal (1876–1938)

Educated at Government College in Lahore, Pakistan, Iqbal studied in England and Germany, where he earned a law degree and a doctorate in philosophy. Iqbal's modern reinterpretation of Islam combined his Islamic heritage with Western philosophy. Both admirer and critic of the West, Iqbal acknowledged the West's dynamic spirit, intellectual tradition, and technology but was sharply critical of European colonialism as well as of the materialism and exploitation of capitalism, the atheism of Marxism, and the moral bankruptcy of secularism.

The *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* summarizes Iqbal's reformist vision. Like other Islamic modernists, Iqbal rejected much of medieval Islam as stagnant. He compared the need for Islamic reform to that confronting Christianity at the time of the Reformation. Iqbal emphasized the need to reclaim the vitality of early Islamic thought and practice, calling for a bold reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) of Islam. He attempted to develop alternative Islamic models for modern Muslim societies. Thus, for example, drawing on Islamic traditions he sought to "rediscover" Islamic principles and values that would provide the basis for Islamic versions of Western concepts and institutions such as democracy and parliamentary government.

### Osama bin Laden (1957–2011)

Born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, bin Laden received a degree in public administration in 1981 from King Abdul-Aziz University. A major turning point in bin Laden's adult life occurred in 1979, when the Soviets occupied Afghanistan. From 1979 to 1982, he used his financial resources to support the *jihadi* resistance against the Soviets, providing construction materials, building roads and airfields, and then moving to Afghanistan to set up his own camps and command Arab *mujahideen* forces, who became known as "Arab Afghans." He later created al-Qaeda, "the Base," to organize and track the fighters and funds being channeled into the Afghan resistance.

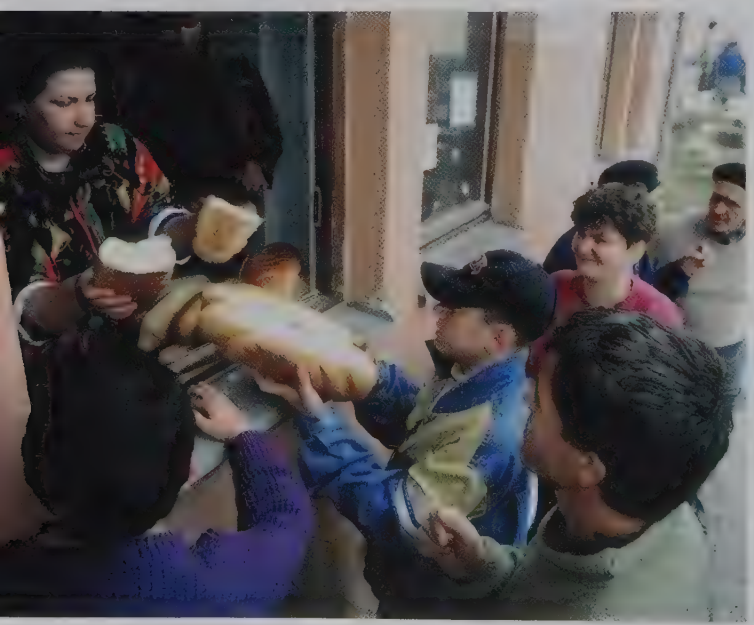
Bin Laden's opposition to the American-led coalition in the Persian Gulf War of 1991 placed him on a collision course with the Saudi government and the West. In 1994, the Saudi kingdom revoked bin Laden's citizenship and moved to freeze his assets because of his support for militant fundamentalist movements. Assuming a vocal leadership role in international terrorism, in 1996 bin Laden issued a Declaration of Jihad that called for the United States to be driven out of Arabia, the overthrow of the Saudi government, the liberation of Islam's holy sites of Mecca and Medina, and the support of revolutionary groups around the world.

In February 1998, bin Laden announced the creation of a transnational coalition of extremist groups, the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, an umbrella group of radical movements across the Muslim world, and issued a *fatwa* emphasizing the duty of all Muslims to kill US citizens and their allies. Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in 2011 by US Navy SEALs.

## The Road to 9/11 and Beyond

At the same time that nonviolent social and political activism was growing, radical extremist groups such as Egypt's Gamaa Islamiyya (Islamic Group) and Islamic Jihad attacked rulers, government institutions, military and security forces, foreign tourists, and Christian churches. Extremists were convicted in the United States and Europe for terrorist acts, such as the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York. Terrorist attacks increased throughout the decade. By the late 1990s, Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, was increasingly regarded as the "godfather" of global terrorism, a major funder of extremist groups and supporter of those involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the killing of eighteen American soldiers in Somalia in 1993, and two bombings in Saudi Arabia—Riyadh in 1995 and Dhahran in 1996. Bin Laden's own organization, al-Qaeda, was linked to a series of terrorist acts: the truck bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that killed 263 people and injured more than 5,000, followed in October 2000 by a suicide bombing attack against the USS *Cole*, which killed seventeen American sailors. September 11, 2001, would prove to be a watershed, signaling the extent to which Muslim extremists had become a global threat, in particular emphasizing the role of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in global terrorism.[6]

Bin Laden's message appealed to the feelings of many in the Arab and Muslim world. A sharp critic of American foreign policy toward the Muslim world, he denounced US support for Israel and sanctions against Iraq, which he said had resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. He dismissed as the "new crusades" the substantial American military presence and economic involvement in his native Saudi Arabia.[7]



The ethnic warfare that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia had tragic effects in Bosnia, one of the oldest Muslim communities in Europe. Refugees of all ages, at Mihatovici, near Tuzla, line up to receive food.

Al-Qaeda represented a new global terrorism, associated at first with the Muslims who had gone to Afghanistan to fight the occupying Soviets in the 1980s, and reflected in acts of terrorism in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, often attributed to Saudi Arabia and Wahhabi Islam. Bin Laden and other terrorists transformed Islam's norms, about the defense of Islam and Muslims under siege, to legitimate acts of violence, warfare and terrorism. Their theology of hate promoted a view of a cosmic struggle (jihad) and war between the armies of God and of Satan, the forces of good and evil, right and wrong, belief and unbelief: those who are not with them were against them.

Al-Qaeda hijacked the Islamic concept and institution of jihad in an attempt to legitimate their acts of violence and terror. In 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan by US Navy SEALs. He was succeeded by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

## ISIS

ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, later renamed the "Islamic State," existed in various forms from the 1990s. Shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established Jamaat al-Tawhid w'al-Jihad (the Party of Monotheism and Jihad), the precursor of the Islamic State. Zarqawi's main targets were Shiah Muslims. The group carried out civilian attacks and beheadings. In 2004, al-Zarqawi gained the recognition and endorsement of bin Laden and al-Qaeda. He placed his group under the umbrella of al-Qaeda, rebranding it as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Zarqawi was killed by American forces in 2006.

In 2011, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the leader or Emir of AQI, largely made up of Iraqis and whose leadership were former Baathist (Saddam Hussein's political party) military and intelligence officers (nearly all previously imprisoned by the United States). With thousands of fighters, including foreign fighters from the United States and Europe, and political instability in Syria, al-Baghdadi opened a second front against Bashar Al Assad, the president of Syria, and the Shiah/Alawites in that country. The group was renamed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to reflect the group's expanding ambitions. In 2014, al-Baghdadi took the title caliph and renamed the movement the so-called Islamic State (IS), claiming its goal was the restoration the Caliphate and that it had religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims globally.

The rapid expansion of ISIS and its ability to hold large parts of Syria and Iraq were made possible by political conditions in those countries, ethnic-religious/sectarian divisions and violence and terror in the region, and the failure of the United States and the international community to respond effectively. However, from 2016 to 2017, ISIS suffered significant setbacks and lost most of its territorial gains and control in Syria and Iraq due to the efforts of a coalition of international forces. ISIS has since returned to its roots as an insurgent organization with sporadic terrorist attacks in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Europe. On October 27, 2019, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS, killed himself, detonating a suicide vest during a raid conducted by the US-led forces in Syria's Idlib Province.

While there were similarities in ideological worldviews and tactics between ISIS and other terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, distinctive differences exist. ISIS sought to create a state, to occupy and control areas, to govern, and to impose their vision of a transnational caliphate with its harsh version of law and order. They were far more ruthless in driving out, suppressing, and executing Shiah and Kurds, Sunni

imams/religious leaders, and others who disagreed, and in demanding conversion to their violent brand of Islam from minorities such as Christians and Yazidis, forcing populations to publicly pledge their allegiance to their caliphate.

As with al-Qaeda, major polls have reported that massive majorities of Muslim globally reject ISIS and their interpretation of Islam. A Pew Research Center report in November 2015 found overwhelmingly negative views of ISIS across Muslim majority countries, including Indonesia, Senegal, Turkey, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Malaysia.[8]

The Doha Institute's 2015 Arab Opinion Index reported that approximately 89 percent of the Arab public—spanning from Saudi Arabia to Mauritania to Jordan to Kuwait to Palestine to Egypt—viewed ISIS negatively.[9] Its few supporters' grievances were rooted in the region's politics and conflicts.

## Globalization and Hijacking of *Jihad*

As already discussed, the word *jihad,* which has become familiar to Western ears, has multiple meanings. On the one hand, the term's primary Quranic religious and spiritual meanings became more widespread: *Jihad* was the "struggle" or effort to follow God's path, to lead a moral life, and to promote social justice. On the other hand, the idea of *jihad* as armed struggle has been widely used by resistance, liberation, and terrorist movements alike to legitimate their cause and recruit followers. Understanding the multiple meanings of *jihad* is critical to understanding Islam and Muslim politics today.

As we learned earlier in this chapter, the central importance of *jihad* is rooted in the Quran's command to "struggle or exert" oneself in the path of God. *Jihad* has two principal meanings. First and foremost, it refers to the moral struggle to be virtuous, to do good works. Depending on circumstances, it also can mean fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, and creating a just society through preaching, teaching, and if necessary, armed struggle. These two broad meanings of *jihad*, nonviolent and violent, are contrasted in a well-known tradition reporting that when Muhammad returned from battle, he told his followers, "We return from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*." The greater *jihad* is the more difficult and more important struggle against one's ego, selfishness, greed, and evil.

## *Jihad* as Armed Struggle

The earliest Quranic verses dealing with the right to engage in a "defensive," armed *jihad* were revealed shortly after the *hijra* (emigration) of Muhammad and his followers to Medina. At a time when they were fleeing from persecution in Mecca and forced to fight for their lives, Muhammad is told in the Quran: "Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God'"

(Quran 22:39–40). The defensive nature of *jihad* is emphasized: "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors" (Quran 2:190).

Both the Quran and Islamic law provide detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of war: who is to fight and who is exempted (Quran 48:17, 9:91), when hostilities must cease (Quran 2:192), and how prisoners should be treated (Quran 47:4). Quranic verses such as 2:294 emphasize that warfare and the response to violence and aggression must be proportional: "Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind." From the earliest times, it was forbidden in Islam to kill noncombatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were promised immunity unless they took part in the fighting.

But what of those Quranic verses, sometimes referred to as the "sword verses," that call for killing unbelievers, such as "When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush" (9:5)? This is one of a number of Quranic verses that are cited by some critics to demonstrate the inherently violent nature of Islam, and that are selectively used (or abused) by some Muslim religious extremists to develop a theology of hate and intolerance and to legitimize unconditional warfare against unbelievers. The privileging of the sword verses dates back to the early centuries of Islam.

During the period of early Muslim expansion and conquest, many of the *ulama* enjoyed royal patronage. They provided a rationale for caliphs to pursue their imperial dreams and, in the name of spreading Islam, to extend the boundaries of their empires. Classical jurists argued that the sword verses (Quran 9:5 and 9:123) abrogated, or canceled, the earlier verses that limited *jihad* to defensive war, thus permitting unprovoked military action in the cause of God. However, the full intent of the sword verse "When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them" is frequently distorted. First, the verse refers to the specific context: The early Muslims were being persecuted and attacked by their Meccan enemy. The term *idolaters* here refers to the Meccan polytheists, not to "unbelievers" in general (or, as Muslim extremists and many Islamophobes would hold, to Jews and Christians). Second, the tendency to quote the first part of the verse in isolation distorts the full intent of the passage, which is followed and qualified by "But if they repent and fulfill their devotional obligations and pay the zakat [the charitable tax on Muslims], then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind" (Quran 9:5).

Bin Laden, al-Baghdadi and other terrorists choose the selective militant interpretation of the so-called sword verses, ignore the criteria of Islamic law for a just *jihad*, and recognize no limits but their own. They reject the tenets of Islamic law regarding the goals and means of a valid *jihad*: that the use of violence must be proportional, that innocent civilians should not be targeted, and that *jihad* can be declared only by a ruler or head of state. Today, extremists legitimate their unholy wars in the name of Islam itself, bypassing the Quranic requirement that authorization for *jihad* be given by a nation's ruler. Militant extremists present the nature of the enemy and the situation

of Muslims as so dire that all, including other Muslims who disagree with them and whom they regard as no longer Muslims, are enemies of Islam and legitimate targets who can be killed by any means.

While al-Qaeda and ISIS have enjoyed support from a significant minority of Muslims and religious leaders, the majority of Muslims and major Islamic scholars and religious leaders have condemned such attacks as unjustified. For example, the Gallup Organization in 2005–2008 surveyed some thirty-five predominantly Muslim countries (from Morocco and Pakistan to Indonesia) as part of its World Poll. The vast majority (93 percent) of all those polled said the 9/11 attacks were unjustified; 7 percent said the attacks were completely justified.[10] The Islamic Research Council at Al-Azhar University, regarded by many as the highest moral authority in Islam, and other prominent religious leaders issued authoritative declarations (*fatwas*) against bin Laden's and other terrorists' initiatives:

> Islam provides clear rules and ethical norms that forbid the killing of non-combatants, as well as women, children, and the elderly, and also forbids the pursuit of the enemy in defeat, the execution of those who surrender, the infliction of harm on prisoners of war, and the destruction of property that is not being used in the hostilities.[11]

## Suicide Bombing: War of the *Fatwas*

Few issues have been more contentious among religious authorities than suicide bombing. The issue of suicide bombing and the question of its legitimacy or illegitimacy crystallized in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (1947–present). Amid escalating Israeli and Palestinian violence, some Palestinians and other Arabs argued that suicide bombers were committing not an act of suicide but one of self-sacrifice, the only option for resistance and retaliation against an enemy with overwhelming military power and foreign support.

Suicide attacks, especially those targeting innocent civilians or noncombatants, precipitated a sharp debate among prominent religious authorities in the Muslim world. Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the late religious leader and founder of Hamas, as well as many other Arab and Palestinian religious leaders have argued that suicide bombing is necessary and justified when faced with Israel's illegal occupation and overwhelming military power. Although Yusuf Qaradawi, a prominent religious scholar and public figure, condemns acts of terrorism and suicide bombings, he has made a clear exception when it comes to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. His strong opposition to Israeli occupation and policies led to early support for suicide bombing in Israel. Qaradawi was one of the first religious scholars to issue a *fatwa* that justified suicide bombings in Israel, based on the premise that Israelis were not civilians but combatants in a war of occupation waged against the Palestinians. In sharp contrast, Abdul-Aziz Al-Shaykh, the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, condemned all suicide bombing as un-Islamic and forbidden by Islam.

## Post 9/11: Impact and Response

Despite the presence of major polling data showing that American Muslims are as educated, integrated, and diverse as other religious groups, the twenty-first century has been a trying time for the Muslim community. The 9/11 bombings in the United States and subsequent acts of terrorism globally were accompanied in the United States and Europe by an exponential growth of far-right politicians, political commentators, media personalities, and some religious leaders who conflated mainstream Islam and Muslims with terrorism. They fed an increase in anti-Muslim discrimination, attitudes, and behaviors ("Islamophobia"), resulting in widespread suspicion of mainstream Muslims, hate crimes, and the belief that Islam, not just Muslim extremism, is a threat.

### *Islamophobia*

At a 2004 UN conference, "Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding," Secretary-General Kofi Annan addressed the international scope of the problem of Islamophobia. At the conference opening, he warned:

> When the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry—that is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with "Islamophobia". . . . Since the September 11 attacks on the United States, many Muslims, particularly in the West, have found themselves the objects of suspicion, harassment and discrimination. . . . Too many people see Islam as a monolith and as intrinsically opposed to the West . . .[12]

Despite Kofi Annan's speech, the use of the term *Islamophobia* would not appear in major American media until 2010, though this problem had continued to grow.

A 2006 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll "found that nearly half of Americans—46 percent—had a negative view of Islam, seven percentage points higher than a few months after Sept. 11, 2001." In Europe, Islam was overwhelmingly singled out as the religion most prone to violence, with percentages of those who agreed with this ranging from 63 percent in Britain to 87 percent in France and 88 percent in the Netherlands. [13]

If some blamed the religion of Islam for the growth of radicalism and the appeal of Osama bin Laden and other terrorist leaders, others identified US and European policies in the Muslim world—uncritical support for authoritarian regimes, Palestinian–Israeli policies, and the West's double standard in promoting democratization—as major catalysts. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and subsequent attacks in Europe and beyond, anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments greatly increased as the vast majority of Muslims were brush-stroked by the vitriolic statements and acts of terrorism carried out by bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations. As a result, many ordinary Muslim citizens were victims of religious and racial bias, discrimination, hate speech, violence, and the erosion of their civil liberties.

Events in August 2010 sparked a national public debate, revealing the depth of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes and attracting national and international attention. Park 51 was a plan to build an Islamic center in Manhattan, two blocks from the site of the World Trade Center. Modeled on the 92nd Street Y, a community center formerly operating as the New York Young Men's/Young Women's Hebrew Association, Park 51's facilities, which were approved by local government and community officials, were to include a prayer room. Yet after this quiet round of approvals, suddenly plans for the center became a national focal point for protests and demonstrations. These were led by anti-Islam and anti-Muslim activists Robert Spencer and Pamela Geller, founders of the Stop Islamization of America. They called the planned center the "Ground Zero Mosque," even though it was not at Ground Zero. Lost in the "fog of war" was the fact that there had been a Muslim prayer room on the seventeenth floor of the World Trade Center's South Tower. On any given day, its users might include financial analysts, carpenters, receptionists, secretaries, and ironworkers. Both Islam itself and Muslims who were American natives, immigrants who had earned citizenship, and visitors conducting international business—the whole Muslim spectrum of nationality and race—were part of the life and among the victims of the World Trade Center bombing.

The protests, demonstrations, and vitriolic language had reached such a fever pitch that they led to an August 30, 2010, *Time* magazine cover story asking "Is America Islamophobic?" The article reported a poll finding that 28 percent of voters did not believe that Muslims should be eligible to sit on the US Supreme Court and that nearly one-third believed that Muslims should be barred from running for president. Media, and particularly social media, enabled bloggers and pundits to spread charged stereotypes and representations and to organize and mobilize pockets of existing anti-Muslim prejudice. In the United States, efforts to erect mosques were met with fierce backlash and charges that they are centers for terrorism.[14] In many US states, anti-*sharia* legislation has been introduced despite the fact that there has been no significant attempt to introduce *sharia* (Islamic law) in America, and that it is impossible to do so under the US Constitution.

The visibility of Islamophobia increased exponentially, and use of the term itself became quite common to describe an extreme fear of and hostility toward Islam and Muslims. It often leads to hate speech and hate crimes, social and political discrimination; can be used to rationalize policies such as mass surveillance, incarceration, and disenfranchisement; and can influence domestic and foreign policy. By 2015, the Public Religion Research Institute said that "no religious, social, or racial and ethnic group [was] perceived as facing greater discrimination in the US than Muslims."[15]

This growth was dramatically illustrated during the primary battles for the 2016 presidential election. Unlike Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who distinguished between the religion of Islam and the vast number of Muslims versus Muslim terrorists, Donald Trump, as a leading Republican candidate for president, expressed very different views. When asked by CNN's Anderson Cooper if he thought "Islam is at war with the West," he responded: "I think Islam hates us.[16]" When asked if he was

talking about the radical Islam of ISIS and other extremist groups, he said, "It's very hard to separate, because you don't know who's who." During the campaign, he also declared: "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on!" On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed his first Muslim ban, Executive Order 13769, titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," politically labeled as a Muslim ban. It temporarily banned refugees' from around the world entry into the United States, halted Muslim nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Yemen) for 90 days, and indefinitely banned the entry of all Syrian refugees.

Chaos and confusion ensued at the airports as the Executive Order came into force with no guidelines. Individuals from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen who were mid-air landed only to be detained for hours by Customs and Border Patrol officials, while others were barred from boarding flights or were pulled off planes overseas. In response, thousands of Americans across the country protested the unlawful measure and airports became the scenes of resistance.

The ban went through three iterations in response to district circuits and an appeals court that upheld a restraining order. The third version of the ban blocks travel to the United States from six predominantly Muslim countries and now also includes North Korean and certain Venezuelan government officials. On June 26, 2018, the US Supreme Court, in a controversial 5-4 decision, upheld the third executive order (Presidential Proclamation 9645) and its accompanying travel ban.

### *Media and Islam*

Coverage in the US and Europe (of 975,000 news stories) analyzed by Media Tenor demonstrates a steady escalation of negative news stories in the twenty-first century.

In 2001, 2 percent of the news stories presented images of Muslim militants with only 0.1 percent coverage of the vast majority of mainstream Muslims. In 2011, the 2 percent increased to 25 percent of stories on extremists, while coverage of mainstream Islam and Muslims remained at 0.1 percent. In Media Tenor's 2015 report: Coverage of Islam (Jan. 1-Dec 31, 2015) negative news stories escalated to an all-time high. Over 80 percent of media coverage on Islam was negative. In the US, UK and Germany 9 out of 10 articles were negative.[17] This increased in 2011 to 25 percent of stories and in 2015 to 80 percent of negative coverage of Islam and Muslims.

This imbalanced coverage, lacking stories of ordinary Muslims, creates a platform for anti-Islam and anti-Muslim statements by politicians and a richly supported cottage industry of bloggers, media pundits, and anti-Muslim websites. Two major studies based on IRS returns reported significant funding for anti-Muslim authors and websites. The first, "Fear, Inc.," found that $42.6 million flowed from seven charitable groups to Islamophobic think tanks between 2001 and 2009.[18] The second, "Confronting Fear: Islamophobia and Its Impact in the United States," reported that Islamophobic groups had access to at least $205 million in total revenue between 2008 and 2013.[19]

## European Muslims

In Europe, anti-Muslim prejudice was closely linked to the "War on Terror" and the anti-immigrant drumbeat about the impending demise of Europe's religious (Christian) identity and cultural heritage. Soon, critics warned, the continent will be transformed into "Eurabia," or in Great Britain, "Londonistan."

The institutionalization of anti-Muslim prejudice is illustrated by *hijab* (head scarf) and/or *burqa* (a long garment covering the whole body from head to feet) and "burkini" (a modest swimsuit that covers the entire body, leaving only the hands, feet, and face exposed) bans in France, Germany, and Austria; by turning women in *burqas* over to the local police in Belgium; and by survey responses about Muslims. In France, 68 percent of French citizens believed Muslims were "not well integrated into society," 55 percent said the "visibility of Islam is too large," and 60 percent were concerned about Muslims' refusal to integrate into French society. In Germany, 79 percent of those surveyed said that Islam was "the most violent religion."[20]

In August 2016, the mayor of Cannes banned the wearing of burkinis (a stylish, full-bodied women's swimsuit) on beaches; other cities across France did the same. France's prime minister backed the ban, stating that the swimsuits were not compatible with French values and were based on the "enslavement of women." Women were issued fines, with some being citing for not wearing an outfit that respected good morals and secularism. On August 26, 2016, France's top

Women join a demonstration organized by "Stand up to Racism" outside the French Embassy in London on August 26, 2016, against the burkini ban on French beaches.

administrative court, in a decision that stunned many in France, overturned the burkini ban.

Far-right political parties, like the British National Party (BNP) led by Nick Griffin and the Netherlands' Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders, have espoused anti-immigrant and anti-immigration policies and fan the flames of Islamophobia with unbalanced and inaccurate narratives about Muslims and Islam. The BNP warned that Islam presented one of the most deadly threats yet to the survival of Great Britain, and Wilders warned of the dangerous Islamization of the Netherlands and that the Koran should be banned and the proliferation of Muslim imams, mosques and schools should be stopped.

The net result of this xenophobic, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant far-right extremism could be seen in the rhetoric, policies, and significant election performance of far-right political parties in Europe: AfD (Germany), Party for Freedom (Netherlands), National Front/Rally (France), Vlaams Beland (Belgium), Freedom Party of Austria, Brexit (United Kingdom), Sweden Democrats Swiss people's party, and Fidesz (Hungary).

In China, followers of traditional Islam (Gedimu, from the Arabic for "old," *qadim*) build communities around small central mosques. Muslim men meet here in Beijing for communal prayers in the central congregational mosque.

## A Common Word Between Us and You

In sharp contrast, in a world where some in the Muslim world and in the West speak of—or even promote—a clash of civilizations between them, an historic event occurred on October 11, 2007. In a dramatic and groundbreaking display of interreligious solidarity, 138 of the world's most senior Muslim leaders wrote a letter, "A Common Word Between Us and You," to the heads of all Christian churches. The letter's authors—Muslims from around the world and from both the Sunni and Shiah, Salafi and Sufi traditions—declared that with over half of the world's population consisting of Muslims and Christians, meaningful world peace can only come from peace and justice between the two largest global faiths, despite their differences. The letter, based on a close study of both the Bible and the Holy Quran, was an open invitation to Christians to unite with Muslims to cooperate in creating peace and understanding and defusing tensions, based on what is most essential to their respective faiths—the commandments of love, the shared belief of both Muslims and Christians in the principles of love of one God and love of neighbor.

## Islam and the Arab Awakening: Between Authoritarianism and Democracy

Beginning in late 2010, the "Arab Uprisings" or "Arab Spring" marked a potentially historic transition in the political makeup of many Muslim countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain. A broad sector of society, eager for change and democratic reforms, made their voices heard and rebelled against decades-long authoritarian rule, reclaiming their dignity and national pride and insisting that they would decide the direction and the future of their countries.

Widespread support for democratic principles was expressed even before the Arab Spring. A major Gallup research study between 2001 and 2007, conducted in more than thirty-five countries, reported that most Muslims "see no contradiction between democratic values and religious principles"[21] Respondents gave strong support for political freedom and freedom of speech. Subsequent polling showed a continued and widespread support for democracy. In 2013, the Pew Research Center published the results of polling done in 2008 through 2012 in the Muslim world and reported, "Most Muslims around the world express support for democracy."[22]

In Egypt and Tunisia, Islamist candidates and parties, though initially not among the leadership, swept into power in democratic, post-uprising elections. If many voted for Islamists, many others were dismayed and feared Islamist rule would lead to increased religiosity in politics. Some asked, "Can the Islamists lead?" The international community, in particular the United States and European Union, were blindsided, as were authoritarian Arab governments, which were challenged to accept the overthrow of their authoritarian allies and work with Islamically oriented government leaders. However, the challenge to new governments to satisfy the expectations of diverse sectors of society, but especially to jump-start failed economies and address issues of high unemployment, failing economies, and the high expectations of the populace, was formidable. For example, in Egypt, in addition to the inexperience and mistakes of the Morsi government, the "deep state" in Egypt—that is, the military, security forces, government bureaucrats, and business leaders—used their still-existing power to block or blunt reforms and force the Morsi government to fail.

By 2013, the Arab Spring began to look like an Arab Winter. Both the governments of Egypt and Tunisia struggled to govern and to deal with opposition critics and movements. The hardest hit was Egypt, where a nationwide anti-protest movement against Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, provided an excuse for a military-backed coup, with strong financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the return to authoritarianism under Egyptian army chief General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Under el-Sisi, the world witnessed the use of lethal force that left thousands dead, and thousands more injured, during the worst violence in modern Egyptian history. The government moved quickly to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, using mass arrests and military trials that drew sharp criticism and condemnation from major international human rights organizations. On March 24, 2014,

an Egyptian court sentenced 529 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to death, the largest mass death sentence Egypt had seen in recent times.

For its part, Syria descended into a protracted and brutal civil war that brought the United States and other European powers back into combat in the Middle East, along with other regional powers. And Libya fragmented and descended into a civil war, its democratically elected government challenged by diverse militias who controlled various sectors of the country.

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the relationships between Islam and democracy are diverse and conflicted. On the one hand, Arab authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are even more entrenched. On the other hand, in other parts of the Muslim world like Senegal, Malaysia, and Indonesia, competitive elections have been held. The old characterization of virtually all Muslim-majority countries as being authoritarian or without significant movements advocating democracy is no longer viable. Few major Muslim organizations or significant political and intellectual leaders identify themselves as being opposed to all forms of popular and democratic political participation.

## Questions for Postmodern Times: Issues of Authority and Interpretation

For Muslims today, the issue of how much change is possible or permissible in Islam, and what kinds of change are necessary, is central to virtually all the questions they face regarding their faith and contemporary life: the relationship of Islam to the state, political participation or democratization, reform of Islamic law, promotion of religious and political pluralism, and the rights of women.

While Muslims continue to affirm belief in God, Muhammad, and the Quran, Muslim interpretations of Islam today vary significantly. Some believe that Islam, like most faiths in the modern age, should be primarily a private matter; many others have struggled to implement Islam in public life as well. Although categories are not clear-cut and at times overlap, certain general Muslim attitudes toward change may be identified: conservative, traditionalist, Islamist (mainstream and extremist), and Muslim neo-modernist.

Conservatives emphasize following past tradition and are wary of significant change or innovation, which they regard as deviation from Islam, the equivalent of Christian heresy. Represented by the majority (though certainly not all) of the *ulama* and their followers, conservatives continue to assert the primacy and adequacy of centuries-old Islamic law. Advocating the reimplementation of Islamic law through the adoption of past legal doctrine, they resist substantive change.

Traditionalists also believe in the centrality of tradition and classical Islamic law. However, many also recognize that those Islamic laws and traditions, based primarily on human interpretation rather than a sacred text, can be reinterpreted, changed, or expanded in light of new social, economic, and political realities.

Islamic activists or Islamists represent a broad spectrum, from ultra-orthodox, literalist, and puritanical movements to more flexible and reform-minded believers, from those who hold mainstream political and social positions to militant extremists and terrorists. In the name of a return to the Quran and Sunnah, fundamentalist-oriented Islamists speak of purifying Muslim belief and practice by a rigorous and literalist embrace of the past, whereas more reformist Islamists and Muslim neo-modernists are prepared to interpret and reformulate Islamic belief and institutions. Muslim neo-modernists, despite some overlap with mainstream Islamists, are more open to substantive change. They distinguish more sharply between the principles and values of Islam's immutable revelation and certain historically and socially conditioned practices and institutions, which they believe can and should be subject to widespread change to meet contemporary circumstances. A dangerous Islamist terrorist minority nonetheless attempts to legitimate and impose their beliefs, recruit followers, and rule domestically and globally.

***fiqh***: "understanding"; human interpretation of divine law that produced Islamic law (*sharia*)

At the heart of reformist approaches to Islam is the relationship of the divine to the human in Islamic law. Thus, reformers focus on the need to distinguish between *sharia*, God's divinely revealed law, and Islamic law, much of which is the product of historically conditioned human understanding (***fiqh***). Reformers go further than conservatives or traditionalists in their acceptance of the degree and extent to which classical Islamic law may be reinterpreted or changed. They argue that, just as early Muslim jurists applied the principles and values of Islam to the societies of the past, today a new reinterpretation or reconstruction of Islam is needed. But who has the authority to do this work?

As in the past, both the *ulama*, the religious scholars of Islam, and Muslim rulers continue to assert their right to protect, defend, and interpret Islam. The *ulama* persist in regarding themselves as the guardians of Islam and its only qualified interpreters. Many rulers combine their obligation to protect and promote Islam with the state's power to impose a certain "brand" of Islam.

Today, however, many reformers argue that it is not rulers or the religious scholars but the laity and parliaments that should be major actors in the process of change. While the *ulama* base their authority on their training in traditional Islamic disciplines, lay Muslims counter that they possess the legal, economic, and medical qualifications necessary to address contemporary issues and should be counted among the "experts" along with the *ulama*.

## Muslims in the West

Muslims were long an invisible presence in the West.[23] Those who came as immigrants wanted to fit in to their new societies and live quietly in their adopted countries. Others wished to live apart, to avoid possible loss of identity or assimilation into a Western, non-Muslim society. Political events in the Muslim world reinforced a desire for a low profile in any country to which Muslims had relocated; in some

cases, Muslims found themselves on the defensive. Images and stereotypes from the past, of camels and harems, were replaced by modern impressions of violence and terrorism associated with the threat of militant "Islamic fundamentalism." The result has often been Muslim-bashing and anti-Muslim bias, discrimination, and violence toward Muslims on the basis of their faith or race—that is, Islamophobia.

Today, Muslims in Europe and America no longer live primarily in clusters of immigrants; rather, they are members of second- and third-generation communities, participating in professional and civic life. Yet many continue to face issues of faith and identity as a religious minority.

## *The Muslims of Western Europe*

More than 44 million Muslims live in Europe. Because many, though certainly not all, wish to retain their religion, culture, and values, the presence and citizenship of Muslims in Western Europe, as in America, have made assimilation, integration, and multiculturalism an increasingly urgent and explosive issue.

In contrast to America, in Western Europe the Muslim presence is due in large part to immigration based on a vestigial colonial connection. After independence, many professionals and skilled laborers from former European colonies in Africa, South Asia, and the Arab world emigrated to Europe, seeking a better life. In the 1960s and 1970s, unskilled workers flooded into European countries whose growing economies welcomed cheap labor. In addition, from the 1970s onward, increasing numbers of Muslim students came to Europe, as they did to America, to study. And while many returned home, others chose to stay for political or economic reasons.

The largest Muslim populations in Western Europe are in France, with 6 million, followed by Germany (5 million) and the United Kingdom (4 million). The Muslims of France now exceed Protestants and Jews in number and are second only to France's Catholic community. There are grand mosques in Paris and Lyon and more than a thousand mosques and prayer rooms throughout the country. The majority of Germany's Muslims are of Turkish origin (63 percent); Britain's Muslims come primarily from the Indian subcontinent.

The issue of Muslim identity has been particularly acute in France, where the government has taken a firm stand in favor of total assimilation or integration. The issue was symbolized in a celebrated case in which female Muslim students were banned from wearing headscarves in public schools. In February 2004, France's National Assembly ignored protests and criticism from around the world and voted 494–36 to approve the controversial ban. Although the new law was aimed primarily at Muslims wearing the *hijab*, other religious apparel (large Christian crucifixes and Jewish skullcaps, or yarmulkes) was included; violators face suspension or expulsion. The government argued that this law is needed not only to protect France's secular traditions but also to ward off rising Islamic fundamentalism. Controversy over Islamic dress continued in 2010, when France, along with Belgium, moved to ban the *niqab* in public places. During the Covid-19 pandemic, while women were still required not to wear the *niqab*, when they took off the *niqab*, they were required to wear medical face masks.

b

(a) In all Islamic communities, mosques are the social and community centers. Here, at the end of the Ramadan fast, women prepare to pray in the mosque in Regent's Park, London. (b) The Muslim community in America is a rich racial, ethnic, and cultural mosaic of indigenous believers, the majority of whom are African American and immigrant Muslims. Thousands of Muslims from New York's varied ethnic communities pray next to Coney Island's landmark Parachute Jump to celebrate the Feast of Sacrifice (Id al-Adha). This major religious holiday commemorates God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Ismail.

Violence and terror in Libya, Iraq, and Syria by militants, ISIS in particular, have launched mass migrations to Western Europe. The influx of large numbers of refugees and their possible impact on jobs and the economy—as well as concerns over safety and security due to ISIS attacks in Paris, Brussels, and other European cities—has raised fears that anti-immigrant, right-wing political parties and their leaders have exploited.

## *Islam in America*

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the United States. Many believe that in the first half of the twenty-first century, Islam will become the second-largest religion in America, after Christianity. Estimates for the number of American Muslims vary significantly, from 3 million to 7 million. Muslim Americans are racially diverse communities in the United States; two-thirds are foreign-born.[24] Most (60 percent) are South Asians from the Indian subcontinent, and 35 percent are indigenous African Americans. The majority are Sunni, but there is a strong Shiah minority. Racial, ethnic, and sectarian differences are reflected in the demographic composition and politics of some mosques as well: Many houses of worship incorporate the diversity of Muslims in America, but the membership of others is drawn along ethnic or racial lines.

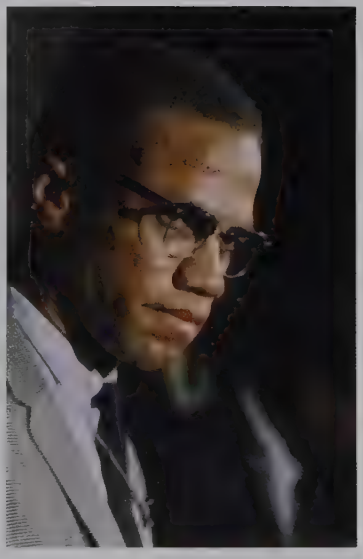
Muslims were present in America prior to the nineteenth century. Perhaps 20 percent of the African slaves brought to America from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries were Muslim. However, most were forced to convert to Christianity. It was not until the late nineteenth century that significant numbers of immigrant Arabs, mostly Christians with a smaller number of Muslims, arrived. After passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, greater numbers of highly skilled Muslims, many from the Middle East and South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), migrated to America. In contrast to Europe, which attracted large numbers of Muslims as immigrant laborers in the 1960s and 1970s, many who have come to America in recent decades have been well-educated professionals, intellectuals, and students.

The Muslim community in America is a rich racial, ethnic, and cultural mosaic of indigenous believers, the majority of whom are African American, and immigrant Muslims. Thousands of Muslims from New York's varied ethnic communities pray next to Coney Island's landmark Parachute Jump to celebrate the Feast of Sacrifice (Id al-Adha). This major religious holiday commemorates God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Ismail.

## *The Transformation of "The Nation of Islam"*

African American Islam emerged in the early twentieth century when a number of black Americans converted to Islam and established movements or communities. Islam's egalitarian ideal, in which all Muslims belong to a brotherhood of believers, transcending race and ethnic ties, proved attractive. The most prominent and lasting movement, the Nation of Islam, was associated with Elijah Muhammad (formerly Elijah Poole, 1897–1975).

Elijah Muhammad had been a follower of Wallace D. Fard Muhammad, who preached a message of black liberation in Detroit in the early 1930s. After Fard mysteriously disappeared in 1934, Elijah Muhammad became the leader of the Nation of Islam. Adopting the title of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, he claimed to be the messenger of God. Under his leadership, the Nation of Islam, popularly known as the Black Muslims, was transformed into a national movement. Elijah Muhammad preached black liberation and nationalism, black pride and identity, strength and self-sufficiency, black racial supremacy, and strong family values. The spirit and ethic of the Nation of Islam was embodied in the phrase "Do for self," a doctrine of economic independence that emphasized self-improvement and responsibility through hard work, discipline, thrift, and abstention from gambling, alcohol, drugs, and eating pork.



Malcolm X (d. 1965), also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, African American Muslim leader, civil and human rights advocate. An early disciple of Elijah Muhammad, chief minister of the Nation of Islam, he became one of its most prominent leaders and spokespersons. He withdrew from the Nation in 1964, becoming a follower of Sunni Islam, and was assassinated in 1965 by members of the Nation.

The Nation of Islam differed significantly from mainstream Islam in a number of basic beliefs. It claimed that Allah (God) was human—the black man named Wallace D. Fard—and that Elijah Muhammad (not the Prophet Muhammad) was the last messenger of God. The Nation taught black supremacy and black separatism, whereas Islam teaches the brotherhood of all believers in a community that transcends racial, tribal, and ethnic boundaries. The Nation did not subscribe to major tenets of the faith, such as the Five Pillars of Islam.

Three individuals epitomize the development and transformation of Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslim movement. These are Malcolm X, Wallace D. Muhammad (Warith Deen Muhammad), and Louis Farrakhan.

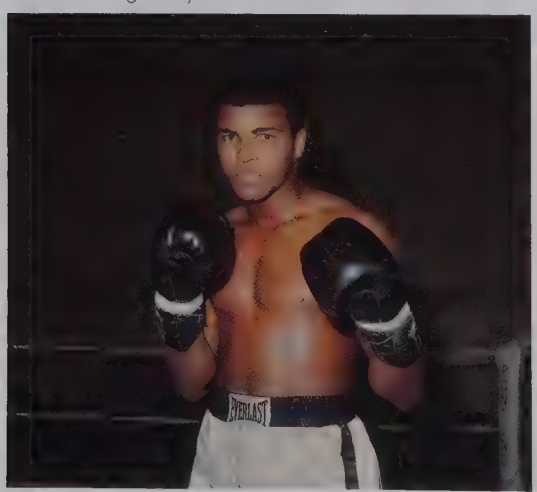
Malcolm X (1925–1965), born Malcolm Little, exemplified the personal and religious transformation for which the Nation of Islam was noted. His experience of racism and prejudice led to his alienation from and rejection of American society, and a prison sentence resulted from an early life of drugs and crime in the ghettos of Roxbury, Massachusetts,

and later in New York's Harlem. During his incarceration (1946–1952), he read widely in history, politics, and religion. Malcolm came to see Christianity as the "white man's religion" and to say that the white man's interpretation of the Bible has been "the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of nonwhite human beings."[25] In 1948, he formally turned to Elijah Muhammad and accepted the teachings of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm Little became Malcolm X.

A gifted speaker, dynamic and articulate, and a charismatic personality, Malcolm X rose quickly through the ranks of the Nation of Islam to national prominence in the 1950s and early 1960s. He organized many of the Nation's temples; started its newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*; and recruited new members, including the boxer Cassius Clay, renamed Muhammad Ali.

Malcolm's increased involvement in domestic and international politics, however, as well as his contacts with Sunni Muslims in America and the Muslim world gradually changed his religious/ideological worldview and put him increasingly at odds with Elijah Muhammad's teachings about self-sufficiency and separation from "white man's politics." Malcolm came to believe that "the Nation of Islam could be even a greater force in the American Black man's overall struggle if we engaged in more action."[26] Such statements made him a target for those within the Nation who were jealous of his prominence. As a result, he found himself increasingly marginalized.

In March 1964, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam to start his own organization. A month later, he went on pilgrimage to Mecca where he underwent a second conversion—to mainstream Sunni Islam. The pilgrimage exposed the contradiction between the religious/separatist teachings of the Nation and those of the global Islamic community. Malcolm was especially affected by the Muslim emphasis, which he experienced firsthand during the *hajj*, on the equality of all believers.




Muhammad Ali, renowned heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Born Cassius Clay in 1942, he revealed in midcareer that he had become a member of the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. He became the most prominent and popular Muslim public figure in America and globally.

During the 1960s, not only Malcolm X but also Elijah Muhammad's son, Wallace D. Muhammad, questioned the teachings and strategy of his father. In February 1975, Wallace succeeded his recently deceased father as supreme minister and, supported by his family and the Nation's leadership, he set about reforming the Nation's doctrines and organizational structure, integrating the Nation within the American Muslim community, the broader American society, and the global Islamic community.

The Nation and its teachings were brought into conformity with orthodox Sunni Islam, and the organization was renamed the World Community of al-Islam in the West (WCIW). Wallace Muhammad made the pilgrimage to Mecca and encouraged his followers to study Arabic to better understand Islam.

The community now observed Islam's Five Pillars. Black separatist doctrines were dropped as the community proceeded to participate in the American political process. The equality of men and women believers was reaffirmed, and women were given more responsible positions in the ministry of the community. In 1980, as if to signal his and the community's new religious identity and mission, Wallace changed his name to Warith Deen Muhammad and renamed the WCIW the American Muslim Mission.

The transformation of the Nation of Islam under Warith Deen Muhammad did not occur without dissent. Louis Farrakhan (born Louis Eugene Walcott, in 1933), a bitter foe of both Malcolm and Wallace, broke with Wallace in March 1978. Farrakhan retained the name and organizational structure of the Nation of Islam as well as its Black Nationalist and separatist doctrines. However, from 1986 onward, while using many of the political and economic teachings and programs of Elijah Muhammad, he moved the Nation closer to more orthodox Islamic practices.

While Farrakhan's militancy and anti-Semitic statements brought condemnation, the effectiveness of the Nation in fighting crime and drugs in African American communities and in rehabilitating prisoners earned praise. Though the Nation of Islam has far fewer members than Warith Deen Muhammad's American Muslim Mission, Farrakhan's persona and actions gave him a disproportionate amount of media visibility and recognition.

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Malcolm X

After leaving the Nation of Islam in March 1964, Malcolm X made the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. The experience transformed his life and changed his perspective on racism:

> There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the nonwhite.
>
> You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions. . . . During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug)—while praying to the same God with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of the blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the "white" Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.
>
> We are truly all the same—brothers. All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Malcom X returned a Muslim rather than a Black Muslim, changing his name to El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm Shabazz was assassinated as he spoke to an audience in New York.

### *Issues of Adaptation and Change*

Muslims in America have been challenged by a culture that, despite separation of church and state, retains a Judeo-Christian ethos, in which Judeo-Christian values are regarded as integral to American identity and Jewish and Christian holidays are officially recognized by the state. The tendency of some in America, as in Europe, to contrast American "national culture" with Islamic values further complicates the process of Muslim assimilation. Finally, the American media's disproportionate coverage of violence and terrorism (as reflected in the maxim "If it bleeds, it leads") has unfairly projected the image of Islam as a particularly militant religion.

Islam in America provides many examples of significant change and reform. Both mosques and their leaders, or imams, have been transformed by the American experience. Because Friday is a workday and a school day in America, many Muslims are not able to attend the Friday congregational prayer. Therefore, for many, Sunday at mosques and Islamic centers is the day of congregational prayer, religious education ("Sunday school"), and socializing. Teaching materials and syllabi on Islam and Muslim life are available for the instruction of children and adults at mosques and in schools. Imams in America not only are responsible for the upkeep of mosques and leading of prayers but often take on the duties of clergy in other faiths, serving as counselors to military and as hospital and prison chaplains.

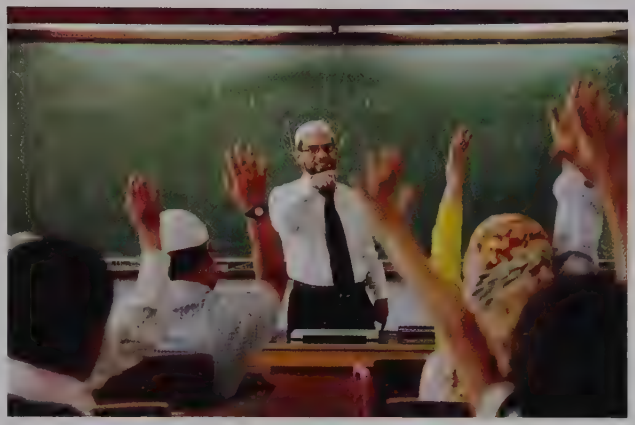
Today, American Muslims increasingly seek to empower themselves, participating in rather than simply reacting to life in America. The contemporary American Muslim community is increasingly more integrated educationally, economically, socially, and in many areas, even religiously. Muslim advocacy and public affairs organizations promote and lobby for Muslim rights and community interests.

Moreover, Muslim educational associations monitor textbooks and the teaching of Islam to ensure accuracy and objectivity. Public affairs organizations respond to misinformation in the media and to objectionable policies and actions by legislators and corporations. They reach out to religious leaders and communities, political leaders and policymakers, human rights organizations and relief agencies. Islamic information services develop and distribute films, videos, and publications on Islam and Muslims in America to further better understanding. Some communities have primary and secondary Islamic schools.

## Islam: Postmodern Challenges

Islam and Muslims are again at an important crossroads today. What does it mean to be a Muslim in an increasingly globalized and pluralistic world and society? How should Islam's sacred sources and heritage be interpreted to respond to issues of religious authority, secularism, the role of *sharia*, the rights of women and minorities, religious extremism, and terrorism?

Like the other children of Abraham, Muslims face questions of faith and identity in a rapidly changing world. As in all faiths, the unity of Islam embraces a diversity of interpretations and expressions, a source of dynamism and growth as well as contention and conflict. The challenge for all remains the pursuit in a diverse world of "the straight path, the way of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth" (Quran 42:52–53).



Like Catholic and Jewish communities that created their own schools to safeguard and preserve the faith and identity of the younger generation, some Muslim communities have created Islamic schools that combine a standard academic curriculum with training in Arabic and Islamic studies.

While the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad remain the basis of belief for all Muslims, questions have been raised—and vigorously debated—in the areas of interpretation, authenticity, and application. Many Muslim scholars distinguish between the Meccan and Medinan *surahs* (chapters). The former are regarded as the earlier and more religiously binding; the latter are seen as primarily political, concerned with Muhammad's creation of the Medinan state and therefore not universally binding. Still other Muslim scholars say that whereas the eternal principles of the Quran are to be applied to changing sociopolitical contexts, rules that addressed conditions in past historical periods are not necessarily binding today.

Although the example (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad has always been the standard in Islam, from earliest times Muslim scholars saw the need to examine

As in other world religions, in Islam marriage is solemnized in a religious ceremony. This Baghdad wedding is an occasion for great joy and celebration among the couple's family and friends.

critically the enormous number of prophetic traditions (*hadith*). A sector of modern Western scholarship questioned the authenticity of the *hadith*, maintaining that the bulk of the Prophetic traditions are fabrications written long after the death of the Prophet. Many Muslim (and some non-Muslim) scholars, while acknowledging issues of historicity and authenticity, have taken exception to this sweeping position. If many of the *ulama* continue to accept the authoritative collections of the past unquestioningly, other Muslim scholars have in fact become more critical in their approach and use of tradition (*hadith*) literature.

Contemporary Muslim debate over the role of Islam in politics and society reflects an array of questions: Is there one classical model or many possible models for the relationship of religion to political, social, and economic development? If a new Islamic synthesis is to be achieved that provides continuity with past tradition, how will this be accomplished? Will it be imposed from above by rulers and/or the *ulama*, or will it be legislated in populist fashion through a representative electoral process? These questions are reflected in the debate over the nature and role of Islamic law in Muslim societies.

## Rethinking Islam: Reformers and Reformist Thought

For several decades, an influential group of vibrant traditionalist and modernist Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders, from Africa to Asia, from Europe to America, have addressed the role of Islam in contemporary society. Their ideas proliferate in hundreds of books and articles, audios, videos, and DVDs, as well as in newspaper editorials, muftis' *fatwas,* and on the internet.

The power of tradition or of classical formulations of Islam affects many critical issues. In Sunni Islam, the consensus (*ijma*) of past religious scholars carries great authority, even though the Quran does not speak to these issues and even if the Prophetic traditions can be cited to show that such restrictions are not required. For Muslim traditionalists, unless modern reforms establish a link and maintain continuity with the authoritative consensus of the past, they are not accepted.

Many reformers point out that the belief that scripture is the literal word of God does not require a literal interpretation of texts, nor does it prevent the re-reading and reinterpretation of religious texts to meet new political and social circumstances and needs. Modern reformers respect tradition, but maintain it should not be an absolute reference point or exclusive religious authority. Reformers do not rely on past interpretations that were developed during different historical and social conditions, are no longer relevant, and sometimes are not even based on a Quranic prescription, Instead, they re-read sacred texts, apply them to today's needs and circumstances, and then produce new or fresh interpretations from the Quran. In Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, which have a long history of being multireligious and multiethnic societies, a number of prominent, Islamically oriented activist intellectual reformers emphasize religious diversity and pluralism. Thus, they combine a

commitment to institutional separation of religion and the state (similar to separation of "church" and "state" in the West) with a commitment to recognizing the importance of religion in public life.

### *Abdurrahman Wahid*

For many years, Indonesia's Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009) led Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of Religious Scholars), the largest Islamic organization (with 35 million members) in the world's largest Muslim country. In 1999, Wahid became the first president of Indonesia's emerging democracy. Wahid bridged the worlds of traditional Islam and "modern" thought. He reflected the Reformasi (reform) movement in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, a broad-based, popular movement for social, political, and economic change. Wahid espoused a cosmopolitan Islam that responded to the demands of modern life and was an inclusive religious, democratic, pluralistic force.[27]

Wahid believed that contemporary Muslims face at a critical crossroads. Rejecting both fundamentalism and the legal-formalism of many conservative Muslims as aberrations that blocked Islam's response to global change, he saw two choices confronting Muslims: to pursue a traditional, static, legally formalistic Islam or to reclaim and refashion an Islamic law within a more dynamic, cosmopolitan, universal, pluralistic worldview that reflected Indonesian Islam's diverse religious and ethnic history and communities. He rejected the notion that Islam should form the basis for the nation-state's political or legal system, which he characterized as a Middle Eastern tradition, alien to Indonesia. Wahid urged Indonesian Muslims to apply a moderate, tolerant brand of Islam to their daily lives in a society where "a Muslim and a non-Muslim are the same," in a state where religion and politics are separate.[28]

### *Mustafa Cerić*

If some religious leaders and Islamic activists today call for Islamically oriented states and criticize or condemn democracy, Mustafa Cerić, the former Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, regards democracy as one of the great benefits brought by the creation of the modern nation-state. A European born in the former Yugoslavia who was trained in the Arab world and the West, Cerić is a Muslim religious leader who also possesses the skills of a politician. Cerić earned his BA in theology at Egypt's Al-Azhar University, sometimes referred to as the Vatican of the Muslim world, and his PhD in Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago. He is extraordinarily well-equipped to bridge the gap between the Muslim world and the West, and between diverse Muslims in Europe.

While crediting Western civilization, especially Europe, for establishing democratic legal systems, Cerić insists these systems are not exclusively Western, stemming from "inherent" Western values, since they are now values that others accept and claim for themselves. He denounces Muslims who oppose multicultural, multireligious, and multinational life, noting that the Quran states many times, "If God wanted, he could

create you to be one nation, but he wanted you to be different nations."[29] He says, "If Arabs use Islam to further their national goals, then we in Europe can do the same thing. If an Egyptian has the right to be a patriot for his country in the name of Islam, then we European Muslims can also be European patriots in the name of Islam . . . As a European Muslim, I want to make my contribution to European civilization and be automatically recognized as such."[30]

Cerić believes that just as being a British, German, or French citizen does not necessarily negate or preclude one's religion, for European Muslims citizenship is religious duty: "I am proud that Islam defines my European patriotism."[31] "There are many forms of Islam: Arab, Ottoman, Bosnian (European). Historically, Islam, like Christianity, was synthesized with indigenous cultures and in that way developed its unique traditions. . . . Just as differences can be found between Catholics in Poland, Austria or France, or between them and other Christian churches, there are different forms of Islam."[32]

### *Timothy Winter*

Timothy Winter (aka Abdul Hakim Murad), a Cambridge University professor and prominent Muslim traditionalist religious leader, utilizes his knowledge of the Islamic tradition to express clear and straightforward rejections of extremists like al-Qaeda as religiously illegitimate and inauthentic. Winter decries extremists' failure to adhere to the classical canons of Islamic law and theology and denounces their *fatwas* as "neither formally nor in their habit of mind deducible from medieval exegesis."[33] He explains that

> their proclamations ignore 14 centuries of Muslim scholarship . . . [They use] lists of anti-American grievances and of Koranic quotations referring to early Muslim wars against Arab idolaters. . . . All this amounts to an odd and extreme violation of the normal methods of Islamic scholarship. . . . An insurrectionist who kills non-combatants is guilty of *baghy*, "armed transgression." a capital offence in Islamic law. A *jihad* can be proclaimed only by a properly constituted state; anything else is pure vigilantism.[34]

On another topic, Winter focuses on the role of religion in politics and society and the separation of church and state, which are critical and contentious issues not only in the West but also in many Muslim countries. Is the separation of Islam and state possible in Islam? What about theocracies like the Islamic Republic of Iran or the rhetoric of militant groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan or ISIS? Winter tackles the issue of Islam and theocracy head on. He dismisses the concept of theocracy as a modern aberration, a departure from Islamic belief and tradition. No single model of an Islamic state exists, Winter insists, nor is there any basis in Islam for a theocracy:

> Another result of this rejection of traditional Islam has been the notion that political power should be in the hands of men of religion. When he came to

power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini remarked that he had achieved something utterly without precedent in Islamic history. The Taliban, by ruling directly rather than advising hereditary rulers, have similarly combined the *sword* and the *pen*. Far from being a traditionalist move, this is a new departure for Islam, and mainstream scholarship regards it with deep suspicion.[35]

### *Amina Wadud*

The role of Islam as a force for progressive change and its relationship to women's political and public participation in human development has been a prominent and debated question/issue. On March 18, 2005, Dr. Amina Wadud, a scholar of the Quran and Islamic Studies in America and a Muslim feminist, broke a centuries-old Islamic tradition requiring that only a male may lead the Friday communal prayer. Wadud led the prayer as an imam with a congregation of over 100 men and women at a mosque in New York City. Some have argued that Islam has no ordained clergy to lead prayer or officiate at weddings, and that nothing in revelation prohibits women from performing such roles. Although it is still uncommon, other women have led mixed-gender prayers in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the face of objections from traditionalist Muslims.

Wadud characterizes her decades-long scholarship and struggle for women's equality and rights as "gender *jihad*." Her struggle (*jihad*) is to liberate women from within the Islamic tradition, to counter the use of Islam to justify women's inequality, which Wadud believes has increased since she converted over four decades ago.

Wadud's believes that the Quran can and should be re-read to accommodate women's changing needs and circumstances. Like many women scholars discussing the Christian Bible, she attempts to re-read the Quran from within her female experience, free of the stereotypes that she believes had plagued earlier interpreters of the Quran. Wadud challenges literalist, misogynist laws and policies. Central to her position is the belief that prejudice against women is attributable to the Quran's interpreters, not to the Quran itself. Those believing that men are superior to women have interpreted the Quran based on those assumptions. The problem in modern times, Wadud argues, is not only that men formulated and developed Islamic law or customs but also the continued influence of patriarchal structures that presume male dominance and superiority. Male religious scholars today, she says, abuse their power.[36]

Wadud notes that Quranic interpreters have not distinguished between the Quranic text and their own subjective interpretations. No two readings of the Quran are the same, though individual understandings can converge on some or many points. To get at the "spirit of the Quran," Wadud's basic method is to interpret the Quran with the Quran. She says that readers must first understand the implications of a Quranic passage for the particular time and place for which it was first revealed. We should also broaden our focus to consider related Quranic passages as well as the Quranic worldview and overriding Quranic principles to derive universal principles that can be apply to the present day.

Wadud's distinctive approach is apparent if we contrast her methodology with that of a traditionalist like Timothy Winter, who relies on classical or medieval Islam as an authoritative reference point to assess the roles of men and women in Islam. Islamic societies, he maintains, are simultaneously both matriarchal and patriarchal. Men dominate public space; private space is dominated by women, who, he says, consider their sphere to be of greater importance. Islam's emphasis on a woman's obedience to her husband is complemented or balanced, in Winter's view, by the traditional veneration of mothers. Like many traditionalists, past and present, he buttresses his position by citing a reported statement of the Prophet Muhammad that "paradise is at the feet of the mother." Wadud counters that, paradoxically, this Prophetic saying has been used not to honor women but to justify the suffering they experience in a patriarchal order. She stresses that women have been relegated to serving the needs of men, and that they are identified solely in relation to what they offer to men as wives and to future generations as mothers, without any consideration of their own needs or the costs of their sacrifices.

### *Heba Raouf*

A professor at Cairo University, social activist, and public intellectual, educated in Cairo and London, Heba Raouf calls for a re-conceptualization of Muslim women's history. Like Amina Wadud, she emphasizes the extent to which Quranic teachings about women—that they have the same religious duties and promised the same rewards as men—were subverted by male religious scholars:

> In the centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad religious scholars increasingly cited a variety of reasons, from moral degeneration in society to woman's imagined tendency to be a source of temptation and social discord, to restrict both their presence in public life and in the space of the mosque.[37]

Raouf stresses the long-overlooked role of women in Muslim history, their role in Sufism as poets and writers of literature, their role as *hadith* scholars, their work in trade and education, and their roles in raising and educating children. Muslim women also established endowments (*Waqf*), using their wealth to contribute to building mosques, hospitals, madrasas, and shelters for battered women.

In contrast to some reformers, however, Raouf insists that efforts to reformulate women's role in Islamic teachings have not been inspired by Western feminism but rather are rooted in Islamic culture and the liberating potential of Islam. She rejects the term *gender jihad* as a "Western feminist" perspective and prefers "*tajdid* [renewal] *jihad*," reflecting the struggle to redefine and renew the vision of an Islamic future.

Contemporary Muslim women, Raouf maintains, have "boldly struggled with balancing the Quran's eternal nature and the way to implement it in historical and

cultural context." Muslim women are distinguished scholars of Islam and members of Islamic social movements, who function as active muftis, reexamining dominant classic religious opinions and producing new interpretations. She emphasizes women's right and duty to engage in this struggle, leading an Islamic renaissance, reconstructing the Muslim mind, to interpret the Quran and practice Islam.

For Raouf, empowering women politically requires disempowering authoritarian regimes. While empowerment for women in the past focused on "bringing some women to power" to represent their sisters, what is needed is "empowering the majority of women." She questions whether appointing women to senior positions in government really reflects democratic change when at the same time organizations like Amnesty International and Transparency International report continued violations against women's basic human and political rights in these same countries.[38]

Raouf emphasizes that equating power with state power and political participation with representation is no longer the only way for women to become more powerful, more politically and socially active and visible.[39] Civil society and the private sector are also important avenues for women's, especially poor women's, grass roots empowerment in the Arab world. Civil society becomes political as well as social, and local governance becomes the key to engaging more women in the public domain so that they can influence policies affecting their day-to-day lives.

## Islamization of the Law

The implementation of *sharia*, where it has occurred, has not followed a fixed pattern or set interpretation even among those countries considered conservative or fundamentalist. For example, women in Saudi Arabia cannot vote or hold public office, but in Pakistan and Iran, women (despite other restraints) vote, hold political office in parliaments and cabinets, teach in universities, and hold responsible professional positions. However, Islamization of law has underscored several problematic areas: the ***hudud*** (Quranically prescribed crimes and punishments for alcohol consumption, theft, fornication, adultery, and false witness), the status of non-Muslims and minorities, and the status of women. All potentially involve changes in Islamic law.

***hudud:*** Quranically prescribed crimes and punishments adopted by some countries and advocated by some groups as evidence of the "Islamic" nature of their political rule and law

While some call for the reimplementation of the *hudud* punishments, other Muslims argue that harsh measures such as amputation for theft and stoning for adultery (not mentioned in the Quran) are, like stoning in the Old Testament or many corporal punishments practiced by governments in centuries past, no longer suitable. Among those who advocate imposition of the *hudud*, some want it introduced immediately, and others say it should be contingent on the creation of a just society in which people will not be driven to steal to survive. Some critics charge that while appropriate relative to the time they were introduced, *hudud* punishments are unnecessary in a modern context.

## Women and Minorities

As we have seen, one result of contemporary Islamic revivalism has been a reexamination of the role of women in Islam. More conservative religious voices have advocated a return to veiling and sexual segregation as well as restrictions on women's education and employment. Muslim women are regarded as teachers of family faith and values, whose primary role as wives and mothers limits or even prevents participation in public life. The imposition of reputed Islamic laws by some governments and the policies of some Islamist movements have reinforced fears of a retreat to the past. Among the prime examples have been the enforcement of veiling, closure of women's schools, restriction of women in the workplace, and extremist attacks and killings. In fact, the picture is far more complex.

Modern forms of Islamic dress have the practical advantage of enabling some women to assert their modesty and dignity while functioning in public life in societies where Western dress often symbolizes a more permissive lifestyle. It creates a protected, private space of respectability in crowded urban environments. For some, it is a sign of a specifically Islamic feminism that rejects what is regarded as the tendency of Western women (and elite, Westernized Muslim women) to go from being defined as restricted sexual objects in a male-dominated tradition to so-called free yet exploited sexual objects. Covering the body, it is argued, defines a woman and gender relations in society in terms of personality and talents rather than physical appearance.

## GENDER FOCUS: Women and Empowerment

Muslim women in the twentieth century had two clear choices: the modern, Westernized lifestyle of an elite minority of women or the more restrictive, traditional "Islamic" lifestyle of the majority of women, who lived much as their grandmothers and great-grandmothers had. The social impact of the Islamic revival has produced a third alternative that is both modern and firmly rooted in Islamic faith, identity, and values. Muslim women, modernists, and Islamists have argued on Islamic grounds for an expanded role for women in Muslim societies. Rejecting the idea that Islam itself is patriarchal, and distinguishing between revelation and its interpretation by all-male *ulama* in patriarchal settings, Muslim women have reasserted the right to be primary participants in redefining their role in society. In many instances, this change has been symbolized by a return to the wearing of Islamic dress or the donning of a headscarf, or *hijab*. Initially prominent primarily among urban middle-class women, this new mode of dress has become more common among a broader sector of society. For many, it is an attempt to combine religious belief and Islamic values of modesty with contemporary freedoms in education and employment, to pair a much-desired process of social change with indigenous Islamic values and ideals. The goal is a more authentic rather than simply Westernized modernization.

Queen Rania of Jordan (center) at prayer with other Muslim women.

New experiments by educated Muslim women to align their lives more closely to Islam have also resulted in more women "returning to the mosque." In the past, when women were restricted to the home and allowed only limited education, they did not participate in public prayer in mosques. While some attended the Friday congregational prayer, sitting separately from the men, it was more common for women to pray at home and to leave religious learning to men.

Featured with Pope Francis, Sheikha Mozah, like many other monarchical wives in the Middle East, is a high-profile figure in Qatar's politics and society. She is chairperson of the Qatar Foundation for Education and a driving force behind Education City and Al Jazeera Children's Channel (now called Jeem TV).

Today in many Muslim countries and communities, particularly those that have been regarded as among the more modernized, women are forming and leading prayer and Quran study groups. To justify these public activities, women cite the examples of Muslim women in early Islam who fought and prayed alongside men and of women who were held in high repute for their knowledge and sanctity. Globally, Muslim women are writing and speaking out on women's issues. They draw on the writings not only of male scholars but also, and most importantly, on a growing number of women scholars who utilize an Islamic discourse to address issues ranging from dress to education, employment, and political participation.

While traditions remain strong and are forcefully defended by those who call for a return to veiling and segregation or seclusion of women, Muslim women have become catalysts for change. In the UAE, as in Iran, the majority of university students are women. Women also have increasingly empowered themselves by entering the professions, running for elective office, becoming students and scholars of Islam, and establishing women's professional organizations. Women's organizations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws, based in Pakistan but international in membership; Malaysia's Sisters in Islam, founded by Zainah Anwar; and Musawah: Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family are active internationally in protecting and promoting the rights of Muslim women.

The Quran and Islamic tradition enjoin modesty, and thus everyone is required to wear modest dress. The diversity of attire found across the Muslim world is reflected in this group of young Muslim women in the United States. Though all are dressed modestly, some wear a headscarf (*hijab*) while others do not.

## Islamic Reform

Islamic reformers face formidable challenges, including the discrediting of militant ideas and ideologies and the reform of those madrasas and universities that perpetuate a "theology of hate" and train so-called jihadists. An obstacle to reform efforts is the ultraconservatism of many (though not all) *ulama*, which hinders reform in the curriculum and training of religious scholars, leaders, and students.

For decades, quietly, persistently, and effectively, a group of reform-minded Muslims have articulated a variety of progressive, constructive Islamic frameworks for reform. These intellectual activists represent voices of reform from North Africa to Southeast Asia and from Europe to North America. They respond to the realities of many Muslim societies, the challenges of authoritarian regimes and secular elites, the dangers of religious extremism, and the burden of well-meaning but often-intransigent conservative religious scholars and leaders.

Islamic reform is a process not only of intellectual ferment and religious debate but also of religious and political unrest and violence. The lessons of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and more recently, Vatican II demonstrate that religious reformations take time and are often fraught with conflict and even danger. Generations of reformers, often a minority within their communities, struggle today against many powerful forces, including conservative religious establishments, with their medieval paradigms; authoritarian regimes able to control or manipulate religion, education, and the media; and political and religious establishments that often see reformers as a threat to their power and privilege.

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. These women from the province of Aceh, contestants seeking to become Miss Indonesia, learn how to perfect the application of makeup.

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: A Bosnian Prayer

Our Lord
Do not let success deceive us
Nor failure take us to despair!
Always remind us that failure is a temptation
That precedes success!
Our Lord
Teach us that tolerance is the highest degree of power
And the desire for revenge
The first sign of weakness! . . .
Our Lord
If we sin against people,
Give us the strength of apology
And if people sin against us,
Give us the strength of forgiveness!
Our Lord
If we forget Thee,
Do not forget us!

Source: A Bosnian Prayer cited by Mustafa Cerić, Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in his "Judaism, Christianity, Islam: Hope or Fear of Our Times," in James L. Heft, ed., *Beyond Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), pp. 54–55.

## Conclusion

With 1.8 billion members—one-fourth of the world's population—the global Muslim community is second only to Christianity's 2.3 billion. Despite setbacks, for fifteen centuries Islam has proven vibrant and dynamic, growing spectacularly as both faith and empire from the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Islam's message and way of life have attracted followers of every race and culture, adapting to diverse cultures from Africa to Asia and from Europe to America. Unity of faith has been accompanied by a diversity of expressions. In the twenty-first century, however, Islam is at a crossroads. Muslims face yet another watershed as they struggle to implement their faith and practice within the realities and challenges of contemporary life.

The struggle for reform is religious, intellectual, spiritual, and moral. But it must be a more rapid and widespread program of Islamic renewal that not only builds on past reform movements but also follows the lead of today's enlightened religious leaders and intellectuals by engaging in the process of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and reform.

The pace of reform has been slow in many countries and societies that are dominated by authoritarian regimes, entrenched elites, and a global politics in which Western governments, despite their democratic principles and values, are often willing to support autocrats to protect their own national interests. The process has been compounded by the threat and attacks of Muslim extremists within Muslim countries and in the West.

In contrast to Christianity's centuries-long Protestant Reformation and Vatican II in Roman Catholicism, the forces of globalization and development today necessitate a more rapid process of change. While the trajectory of Islamic reform and

its outcome remain uncertain, Muslims are challenged to exemplify the Quranic prescription that the Islamic community (*ummah*) pursue a just and middle (*wasat*) path: "Thus We have made you a just community, that you may witness to humanity" (2:143) as, like those before them, it seeks to follow "the straight path, the way of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth" (42:52–53).

## Discussion Questions

1. Identify and describe the Five Pillars of Islam.
2. What are the differences between Sunnis, Shiah, and Sufis?
3. What is the difference between the *sharia* and *fiqh*? What impact have these aspects of Islam had on modern revivalism and reformism?
4. What are the origins of the Crusades? Explain their long-term effects on Muslim–Christian/Western relations.
5. Discuss the impact of European colonialism on the Muslim world. What are some of the ways in which Muslims responded to it?
6. What is *ijtihad*? Why is this concept at the heart of the question of the relationship between Islam and modernity?
7. Describe the different themes and techniques used for the revival and reform of Islam in the eighteenth century.
8. Discuss the basic tenets and significance of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami.
9. What are the causes and conditions that led to the contemporary resurgence of Islam?
10. How is Islam used both to support and to oppose the state? Give examples.
11. Describe the diverse meanings of *jihad*. How has the concept been used by different Islamic movements to justify their activities?
12. Discuss the origin and development of the Nation of Islam. Do African American Muslims differ from mainstream Muslims?
13. How has Islam affected or changed the status of women? How are women influenced by Islamic movements today? How are they influencing these movements?
14. What are some of the major issues facing Muslims living in non-Muslim-majority countries today, particularly in Europe and America?
15. Identify and discuss several key areas of Islamic reform.
16. Identify two Muslim women reformers and compare and contrast their reformist ideas.
17. Compare and contrast the worldviews of Al Qaeda and ISIS.

## Key Terms

Allah
caliphs
*dar al-Islam*
*dhimmi*
*fatwas*
*fiqh*
*hadith*
*hajj*
*hijra*
*hudud*
*ijma*
*ijtihad*
imam
Islam
*jahiliyya*
*jihad*
*khutba*
Mahdi
*masjid*
*minbar*
*muftis*
*mujaddid*
Muslim
People of the Book
*purdah*
*qiyas*
Quran
*salat*
*shahadah*
*sharia*
Shiah
Sufis
Sufism
Sunnah
Sunni
*surahs*
*tawhid*
*ulama*
*ummah*
*wali*
*zakat*

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## Additional Resources

Oxford Bibliographies Online (http://oxfordbibliographies.com). Developed cooperatively with scholars and librarians worldwide, the "Islamic Studies" portal at this site is an excellent starting point for research and further understanding.

Oxford Islamic Studies Online (http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com). A comprehensive scholarly resource for the study of Islam.

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# 6 HINDUISM, JAINISM, AND SIKHISM

## South Asian Religions

### Overview

*Namaskar.* Millions of Hindus every day offer this ancient Sanskrit greeting to each other as well as their gods. Whether they are in the ancient city of Varanasi (Benares) or a newly consecrated sanctuary in Minneapolis, Minnesota, this greeting gives clear indication that we are entering the religious domain of South Asian religions.

What immigrants from all over modern South Asia practice as Hinduism is much less varied than what their relatives back in their homeland observe. Ancient beliefs and practices continue to thrive today despite all the revisions and reforms introduced by colonial rule, independence, and the advent of science. In India and across the Hindu diaspora, there are newly built monasteries for traditional study (***mathas***) at the feet of recognized masters, or ***gurus***. And there are also yoga centers in major cities like Mumbai that cater to India's new middle class that resemble those found in London or Chicago. Add to these the Jain and Sikh temples, as well as the new Hindu sects that have arisen around charismatic gurus who combine classic doctrines with ideas from other Asian traditions or the West. There are even communities today in which very conservative priests memorize, recite, and pass down the earliest hymns

***mathas:*** Hindu monasteries

**gurus:** spiritual and cultural teachers, regarded by students as semidivine

◀ Brahmin priests worshipping an image of Vishnu, requesting divine blessings for their community.

and rituals, some dating back 3,000 years. And in the great centers such as Varanasi, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims each year make offerings and see the deities enshrined in their magnificent temples. In many villages across the Indian subcontinent, where 60 percent of the population still lives, ritual practices within families and in local temples remain vigorous.

## Hinduism Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| ca. 3500–1600 BCE | Indus Valley civilization in northwestern South Asia |
| 1500 | Decline of major Indus cities; populations migrate east to Gangetic plain |
| 1500–500 | Formative period of Vedic civilization |
| 900–400 | Shramana period of wandering ascetics and composition of the first Upanishads |
| 500 | Lifetimes of Shakyamuni, the Buddha, and Mahavira, founder of Jainism |
| 300–100 | Texts of brahmanical orthodoxy formulated (e.g., *Laws of Manu*) |
| 100 BCE–400 CE | Composition of devotional texts and epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* |
| 50 BCE–300 CE | Composition of the *Bhagavad Gita* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* |
| 100–700 CE | Hindu traditions established along rim of Indian Ocean in Southeast Asia |
| 320–647 | Classical temple Hinduism established |
| 500–ff. | Development of Advaita Vedanta school; textual expressions of Hindu tantrism as counterculture |
| 788 (?)–820 | Life of Shankara, exponent of Advaita Vedanta and creator of Hindu monasticism |
| 800–1200 | Six brahmanical schools established as divisions in elite philosophical Hinduism |
| 1025–1137 | Life of Ramanuja, philosophical defender of bhakti faith |
| 1192–1780 | Muslim rule of North India; Buddhism virtually extinguished in South Asia |
| 1420–1550 | Era of great devotional saints (e.g., Mirabai, Ravidas, Kabir, Chaitanya, and Surdas) |
| 1469–1539 | Life of Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith |
| 1526–1707 | Mughal dynasty; Muslim rulers move from ecumenical views to anti-Hindu, anti-Sikh policies |
| 1708 | Death of tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh; text Adi Granth declared guru of the community |
| 1757–1857 | British East India Company dominates Indian political life |
| 1815 | Christian missionaries present in most cities and towns of British India |
| 1828 | Founding of the Brahmo Sabha (later Brahmo Samaj) by Rammohan Roy |
| 1830–1890 | First Hindu texts reach North America, influence the Transcendentalists |
| 1834–1886 | Life of Ramakrishna, charismatic guru with ecumenical teaching |
| 1858– | After uprising by Indian troops, British crown assumes direct rule over India; South Asian ethnic groups recruited for government service across British Empire spread Hinduism globally |

In this chapter, we will explore how Hinduism and the other South Asian religious traditions are unlike the monotheistic world religions. To start with, we need to understand what the term *Hinduism* does and does not mean.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1863–1902 | Life of Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's disciple, who led global Ramakrishna Mission |
| 1875 | Foundation of the Arya Samaj by Swami Dayananda |
| 1920–1948 | Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) leads civil disobedience campaigns, articulating ecumenical Hindu reformism influenced by Western culture |
| 1923 | Founding of the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hindu nationalist group |
| 1940 | Ashram established by Sathya Sai Baba, beginning of large global movement |
| 1947 | Independence of India from Britain; prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, institutes constitution that defines India a secular state |
| 1948 | Gandhi assassinated by Hindu extremist |
| 1964 | Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) founded to unite Hindu leaders and devotees worldwide |
| 1964 | International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) established by Bhaktivedanta (1896–1977) |
| 1984 | Sikh extremists occupy Golden Temple in Amritsar; armed removal by Indian army; assassination of the prime minister, Indira Gandhi |
| 1987 | Weekly Indian television series *Ramayana* inspires rising sentiments of Hindu nationalism |
| 1992 | Hindu agitation in Ayodhya culminates in destruction of Babri Mosque; Hindu–Muslim riots across South Asia |
| 1995 | The Swaminarayan Mandir opens in London, the largest traditionally built Hindu temple outside India |
| 1998 | The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party, wins parliamentary majority for the first time; rules until 2004 |
| 2002 | Hindu hooligans riot in BJP-led Gujarat state, killing 2,500 Muslims, looting Muslim businesses, and displacing 200,000 |
| 2004 | BJP loses national parliamentary elections but retains control of ten states across India |
| 2007 | During Kumbha Mela, Hindu holy men stage demonstration against Ganges pollution |
| 2011 | Death of global Hindu teacher Sathya Sai Baba |
| 2014 | BJP wins national parliamentary elections; efforts to rewrite school books according to nationalist ideology |
| 2019 | BJP suspends constitution in Kashmir, passes immigration laws seen as anti-Muslim; rising incidents of mob violence against Muslims |
| 2020 | Supreme Court rules that temple to Rama can be built in Ayodhya |

## Defining Hinduism: Unity, Diversity, Localities

What we label "Hinduism" ranges from monotheism to polytheism to atheism; from nonviolent ethics to moral systems that require blood sacrifices to sustain the world; from critical, scholastic philosophical discussion to the cultivation of sublime, mystical, wordless inner experiences. *Hinduism*, as we use the term, indicates the variety of spiritual traditions originating in South Asia that comprise the third-largest world religion today. The term owes its origins to *Sindhu*, the Persian word for the great Indus River. Conquering Muslims used *Hindu* to designate people who lived east of the Indus, and later, the British applied the term to the non-Muslim natives of the region.

A singular term for "Hinduism" was never in use in premodern South Asia, and it never stood for a single way of being religious. Some South Asian intellectuals and politicians in the last two centuries did adopt it to distinguish its beliefs from those of Islam and Christianity. But what is meant, or what should be meant, by "true Hinduism" has remained contested throughout history, especially in the modern and postcolonial eras.

Religion in South Asia has been the most pluralistic and least centrally organized in the world, a characteristic dating back at least a millennium. Traditions under the umbrella of Hinduism incorporate differences at least as fundamental as those between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Therefore, it is only by distinguishing the various "Hindu" traditions from the more general and monolithic term *Hinduism* that we can make careful and cogent comparisons with other world religions.

Although the great majority of Hindus live on the South Asian subcontinent, an important postcolonial development has been their global diaspora, which has made Hinduism a global faith today. The estimated number of Hindus had surpassed 800 million by the turn of the millennium; after Islam, it is the second-fastest-growing world religion. Today, India remains the heartland of Hindu traditions (see Map 6.1), even though the modern state of India has been a secular democracy since its inception in 1947. It has over eighteen major cultural regions, whose ethnic groups speak over a thousand languages. And while every region in South Asia has its own distinctive religious history, the most profound differences are seen between the traditions of North and South India.

Among the other South Asian states, Nepal was until 2006 the world's only nation ruled by a Hindu king under Hindu law, with a large majority of its 30 million people identifying themselves as Hindu. Two Muslim nations, Pakistan and Bangladesh, contain Hindu minorities (3 percent and 16 percent, respectively). Fifteen percent of Buddhist Sri Lanka's population of 25 million is Hindu. Five to 10 percent of Malaysia's large population is Hindu. Small communities of Hindus are also found in Myanmar (Burma), Indonesia, Fiji, and the Caribbean.

In North America, there are over 2.25 million Hindus, with immigrants far outnumbering converts, making Hinduism the fifth-largest religious group. In the United States, as across Europe, Hindu temples serve as centers of religious teaching and ritual practice. The yoga and meditation traditions that involve training the body

Map 6.1 India, with major cities and holy places.

and mind have been the most influential vehicles for spreading Hinduism among non-Indian peoples.

This chapter surveys the two great spiritual traditions originating in South Asia besides Hinduism: Jainism, which began 2,500 years ago, and Sikhism, which began about 500 years ago.[1] (Buddhism, the third great religion of South Asia, is the subject of Chapter 7.) We begin with the earliest form of religious life shaped by the Vedas, texts that are among the oldest (3,500 years old) in human history. We next move through a succession of religious beliefs and practices that have found expression since then, flourishing without priests or institutional authority, after which we focus on how these loosely connected traditions were affected by Islamic rule (1200–1758) and on the founding of the separate world religion called Sikhism. The chapter then turns to the effects of British colonialism (1780–1947) on religious life in South Asia. Finally, this chapter conveys a sense of modern and postcolonial changes amid the extraordinary continuities in religious life today, some of which date back three millennia.

## Encounter with Modernity: Hindu Challenges to India as a Secular State

Religion in South Asia has continued to develop throughout its history, preserving the past even amid striking innovations. This was possible, in part, because no single priestly group, theologian, or institution ever imposed a universal definition of the core beliefs. Regional diversities made this religious freedom even more pronounced, and in South Asia, the religious imagination and questing after spiritual experience have been extraordinary. No heresy trials or inquisitions have occurred in South Asia's long history; in fact, debating spiritual truths was a regular feature of premodern court life and in society at large. This pattern of exuberant pluralism continues to the present, so that ancient traditions are preserved alongside those originating in the medieval era, and these threads weave together with yet newer traditions introduced by nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers.

Because of this internal diversity, as well as the very large numbers of Muslims and adherents to other religions, those who led South Asia to independence from colonial rule firmly believed in the Western concept of the secular state. These leaders, including Mohandas K. Gandhi, insisted that for India to be modern, it should be a secular democracy, formally favoring no religion. In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, many Hindu citizens have questioned this stance.

***Hindutva:*** "Hinduness"; Hindu identity

In reacting to perceived threats from modern secularism and non-Hindus, Hindu revivalist groups have created new organizations to promote the religion. Among the many responses to British colonial rule, one of the most enduring has come from institutions calling for thoroughgoing reform of "Hindu-ness" (***Hindutva***) in national life and the reconstitution of India as a Hindu state. With roots among nineteenth-century reformers, this ideology began to be forcefully articulated in 1923 across the nation

by the **Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh** ("National Union of [Hindu] Volunteers"), known as the **RSS**. This group proposed a nativist definition of "Hinduism" as devotion to "Mother India." Its members have worked in the political arena to promote candidates wishing to repeal the secular rule of law India instituted in 1947, when the country gained independence from Great Britain. By 2020, RSS membership had grown to over 5 million; it now claims over 57,000 branches and runs schools, medical centers, media outlets, and women's groups.

**Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS):** "National Union of [Hindu] Volunteers"; group advocating "Hinduism" as devotion to "Mother India"

It was only with the most recent incarnation of an RSS-allied political party, the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**, that Hindu nationalists finally found its first success in electoral politics across the nation. In the 1998 elections, the BJP became India's ruling party, a position it held until 2004. Campaigning on economic themes, the BJP won back control over the Indian Parliament again in the spring of 2014, and won re-election in 2019, having become India's richest political party.

**Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** Hindu nationalist political party

The BJP, which is led mostly by high-caste politicians and appeals primarily to middle-class urbanites, rose in prominence as its leaders sought to symbolize the unity of a militant and revived Hindu India. It also stoked popular resentment over government-sponsored affirmative action initiatives that set quotas for civil service hiring and admission to state colleges for the most disadvantaged, or "scheduled caste" members, a move aimed to break disproportionate high-caste control over the nation's governmental and educational institutions.

The most hardline RSS practice is to provoke confrontations with South Asian Muslims, its organized crowds often repeating "The only place for Muslims: the graveyard or Pakistan," and it accuses the secular government of favoring them in its civil laws and of protecting medieval-era mosques that were purportedly built on sites sacred to Hindus. The first and most violent focus was on Ayodhya, a North Indian city where in 1528 the Mughal ruler Babar built the Babri Mosque. Modern BJP partisans, allied with the RSS, claim that the site was the birthplace of Rama, a human incarnation of the god Vishnu. Responding to the call made by many Hindu nationalist groups, thousands of volunteers converged on the site in December 1992. They attacked and subdued government troops protecting the site and then broke up the Babri Mosque with hammers, steel rods, and crowbars. In the aftermath, rioting broke out between Muslims and Hindus in other Indian towns and in Pakistan. Over 2,000 people perished. In 2020, the Indian Supreme Court finally allowed construction to begin on a Hindu temple on this site.

The RSS- and BJP-led movements are similar to religious modernizations found elsewhere in the world: They adopt the latest media technology to promote their message; they reject Enlightenment-inspired critiques of religious belief; they insist that the secular political systems established in the colonial and postcolonial eras give way to a religious state. More specifically, they have used the ancient idea of Mother India to express symbolically their sense of her being "raped" during Muslim, colonial, and postcolonial secular rule.

The appeal of the Hindu-India movement has shown persistent strength. Hindu nationalists have provided a focal point for political action by those involved in guru-oriented sects, with their emphasis on personal devotional enthusiasm (discussed later in this chapter), and for those middle-class Hindus now drawn to yoga centers

of today (also discussed later), both of which offer different versions of "Hinduism." Nationalist politicians thus appeal to religious identity and arouse anti-Muslim sentiments to attract a large number of middle-class Hindus across the nation.[2] To better understand the significance of Hindu nationalism's challenge to modern secular India, we must go back to the beginning and trace the historical development of this tradition.

## Premodern Hinduism: The Formative Era

### The Aryans and Religion in the Vedic Era

The story of ancient South Asian history used to be simple: the invasion of the subcontinent from the northwest by an aggressive, light-skinned people who called themselves Aryans. This warrior-led people were imagined to have destroyed the cities of the Indus Valley, a civilization as ancient as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia. After forcing the dark-skinned inhabitants of the Indus Valley to flee to southern India, the Aryan groups moved east and subdued the settlements they encountered across the Gangetic plain. This version of history was used to explain the modern distribution of "north" and "south" India as separate linguistic and racial zones. And in this telling, the Aryans were supposed to be a militarily and culturally superior people.

Then, when Sanskrit, the language of Hinduism's Vedic hymns, was discovered to be an Indo-European language and therefore related to most languages of Europe, it was also concluded that the ancestors of the modern Hindu elite were distantly kin to the British. This view of history contained a racial assumption welcomed by early European scholars as well as by high-caste Hindus in the modern and postcolonial era. Western archaeologists and the British government supported research that pursued this theory, thereby justifying their colonial presence. British imperial rulers in particular welcomed support for their view of ancient India as a great civilization, in contrast to modern India and Hindus, who were regarded as inferiors, superstitious, and led by corrupt Hindu priests.

Bull seal, Harappa, ca. 1800 BCE. Although the meaning of the zebu bull symbol here is uncertain, this animal was later regarded as the vehicle of the great god Shiva.

Although a long and steady migration into South Asia in prehistory is accepted by objective historians, scholars now find no justification for understanding *Aryan* as a racial term, and they reject any suggestion that the ancient Aryans or their descendants were or are culturally superior to those living in South Asia before them. The ancient Indus Valley cities are now understood to have declined not through conquest but owing to regional climatic changes. There are also signs that the Indus Valley culture in fact contributed significantly to subsequent "Aryan" culture. Although "Aryan culture" had been adopted by most politically dominant groups across the region by 700 BCE, most of the religious beliefs and ritual practices of Hindus today are those recorded in texts that were composed *after* the original four Vedas, which we'll discuss more in this next section.

## Vedic Religion

Knowledge of early Hinduism comes from the four **Vedas**, a collection of over a thousand hymns in Sanskrit addressed to the gods. The oldest is the *Rig Veda*. These hymns show no systematic ordering or single mythological framework. The Vedic hymns likely were collected and appreciated by only the most elite social groups of that earlier millennium (1500–500 BCE).

**Vedas:** collection of earliest Hindu hymns

Early Vedic religion was centered on fire sacrifices. The sacrifices were performed by a special, hereditary group of priests called ***brahmins***, who chanted the Vedic hymns and orchestrated intricate rituals intended to gratify the numerous Aryan deities. Accompanied by chants, the brahmins placed grain, animal flesh, and clarified butter in a blazing fire, thereby transforming the offerings into fragrant smoke to nourish and please the gods. If kept happy, well fed, and strengthened through the offerings, the deities would sustain creation and ensure the prosperity of the sacrificers.

**brahmins:** highest caste, many serving as priests

Sanskrit, the language of the Vedic hymns, was thought to be divine in origin. The hymns were memorized by brahmin priests and taught to men in succeeding generations. The Vedas existed for over two millennia in oral form; the earliest extant written manuscripts, which date back only to the eleventh century CE, include annotations showing proper accents and supplying ritual contexts.

The major deities of the Vedic world, all male, were connected to sacrifice, martial conquest, mystical experience, and maintenance of moral order. Agni, the fire god, was essential for the successful ritual. Indra, the warrior deity, has the greatest number of hymns dedicated to him. It was Indra who subdued foreign gods, and

A brahmin priest in Nepal tends a sacrificial fire pit for his patrons.

"In your offspring you are born again; That, O Mortal, is your immortality."

*—Taittiriya Brahmana*

SOURCE: Quoted in Patrick Olivelle, *Samnyasa Upanishads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. v.

it was Indra who was called on to lead the Aryan men into battle. The deity Soma was a divine presence dwelling within a psychoactive substance of the same name, which humans and deities drank before battle and at the end of major rituals. Another important deity, Varuna, was thought to enforce the moral order of the universe and to distribute punishment or reward. The hymns indicate that humans approached Varuna with personal petitions for forgiveness.

Death and afterlife in the early Vedic era were envisioned as two alternative destinies. There was the possibility of becoming an ancestor and reaching a heavenly afterlife if one lived morally, but only if one's family, in the first year after one's death, performed special memorial rituals. Alternatively, those whose deeds were immoral or whose families failed to do the proper rituals lost their individual identity and merely dissolved back into the earth.

Vedic religion was marked by faith in the power of the gods, ritual acts to influence them, and reliance on the spiritual resonance of Sanskrit words. A fire sacrifice, performed by brahmins, was the central practice. The earliest Aryans believed with absolute certainty in the primacy of their deities, but by 100 CE, the dominant devotional tradition placed all the central deities of the earliest pantheon into lesser roles: Indra was now king of the minor heavenly hosts, Agni was confined to being a guardian of ritual, Soma was seen as the deity residing in the moon, and Varuna became the lord of the ocean. Similarly, the Vedic concept of the natural human order that the gods enforced was replaced by a view of life governed by what are still the three dominant themes in Hinduism: reincarnation, the law of karma, and the concept of sacred duty.

## Karma and the Quest for Liberation

**Upanishads:** appendices to the Vedas that record Hindu mystical teachings

Later Vedic hymns indicate that a very different spiritual orientation had entered the Aryan world. The practice of asceticism—involving retreat into the forest, silent introspection, and the cultivation of trance states—was likely the first indigenous pre-Vedic spiritual tradition absorbed into the dominant religion. A synthesis of this spirituality emerges in the **Upanishads**, the remarkable tracts that began to be appended to the Vedic hymns after 1000 BCE. The dialogues themselves and the name they are given—*upanishad* means "sitting near devotedly"—portray disciples learning at the feet of gurus who have gone beyond the Vedic sacrificial framework to adopt ascetic practices. These gurus developed new teachings and practices aimed at realizing the fundamental realities underlying all existence.

**samsara:** "the world" of rebirth subject to the law of karma

**Brahman:** unchanging world spirit that arises at creation

The central idea they taught was the human reality of **samsara**, "the world," in which all phenomena are ultimately an illusion. Blinded by ignorance and desire, humans act foolishly and thereby suffer. They are reborn in samsara until they realize that the underlying reality is everywhere the same, and that it is the unchanging spirit (**Brahman**). This truth is stated concisely in the Chandogya Upanishad when the teacher states, "That [i.e., Brahman] thou art," or more directly, "You are divine." In samsara, beings die but their

immortal individual soul (**atman**) is reincarnated over and over again until it finds release through undertaking spiritual practices that eliminate desire and ignorance. In the Upanishads, what is essential is to realize that our inner essence, the atman, is identified with Brahman, the ultimate reality of the world, the universal spirit.[3]

An individual's destiny in samsara is determined by his or her actions (deeds and thoughts). Good deeds lead to good consequences, while bad deeds lead to evil consequences. This natural law, which operates throughout samsara and affects the destiny of the atman, is called **karma**, a complex term whose meaning is often oversimplified. Ultimately, through good deeds and specific yoga practices, the individual works toward realization of the highest truth and the achievement of ***moksha***, release from further reincarnation. (All the world religions born in India, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, accept the reality of samsara, but they differ in their analysis of karma and the practices needed to achieve moksha.)

Seeking to discern Brahman within themselves, ancient Hindu holy men practiced many forms of austerity, as shown in this Punjabi painting of yoga positions.

The great majority of Hindus base their religious lives around the reality of karma. Although interpretations vary, Hindu karma doctrine asserts that all actions performed by an individual set into motion a cause that will lead to a moral effect in the present and/or future lifetimes. A natural mechanism functions to make the cosmos orderly and just. This has meant that inclinations to do good and avoid evil were backed up by the belief in karmic consequences for one's actions. Since old karma is coming to fruition constantly and new karma is being made continuously, it is—in most explications—incorrect to see karma doctrine as fatalism. Further, not all events in life are due to karma; Indic religious philosophies and medical theory have also recognized natural causalities as part of the human condition.

**atman:** the soul, which transmigrates after death

**karma:** "action"; effects of actions that condition a being's future

**moksha:** "release" from future rebirths and deaths; salvation

What is implicit in karma theory for typical human beings is that one's karma in daily life is in fact unknown. In practice, this uncertainty principle explains the Hindu tendency to turn to astrology for guidance at times of important decisions. As Indian society developed, other ideas were tied to karma, weaving tighter the socioreligious fabric of classical Hinduism.

## Yoga

**Yoga** refers to various disciplined practices by which humans can realize their true spiritual essence, the atman within. First appearing in the late Upanishads, these practices were codified in a text, the ***Yoga Sutras***, attributed to a sage named Patanjali (ca.

**yoga:** "union"; practices that lead to union with the divine

***Yoga Sutras*:** ancient text codifying yoga practices, attributed to Patanjali

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: A Maid Teaches a Holy Man How to Discern Rebirth Destiny

A certain holy man, well skilled in Brahmanical lore and who had spent his whole life in the study of the Vedas and other religious works, went on a journey. At the first town he entered he . . . while resting himself [near a domicile], saw a funeral pass . . . when, to his astonishment, he heard the mistress from within the house inquire from the maidservant as to whether the deceased had gone to heaven. Commanded to do so, the girl went out, and in a short time returned, giving an answer in the affirmative. A similar occurrence took place, but in this instance the maidservant's reply was in the negative. Lost in amazement, the sage demanded how she was able to make known the workings of karma which were to him, notwithstanding all his learning, inscrutable. The maid replied that it was an extremely easy task to ascertain the destination of departed souls . . . as it was only necessary to attend at the . . . place of cremation and listen to the opinion expressed regarding them by their neighbors. If ten of them concurred in speaking in praise of the deceased, it was almost certain that he had gone to a heavenly rebirth; if, on the contrary, they agreed in asserting that he was an evildoer, it was equally sure that he went to a worse rebirth.

Source: A. K. Ramanujan, *Folktales from India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993), p. 55.

150 BCE). The yoga meditation tradition is for the highly advanced spiritual elite, for those attempting to escape samsara by ending, or "burning up," all past karma.

The *Yoga Sutras* assume that yoga can be performed properly only by individuals of high moral character who have renounced most material possessions, live in simplicity (including vegetarianism), and study the teachings regarding the "inner reality." Practice begins first with postures designed to make the body flexible and to awaken its energies, then develops breath control to harness and enhance the body's primal energy. After focusing the mind on a single object for long periods, the *yogin*, or adept practitioner experiences increasingly refined states of consciousness as the mind is withdrawn from external sensation. These experiences culminate in a trance state (*samadhi*). It is in samadhi that the yogin develops awareness of the origin of consciousness itself: the life-giving, pure, and blissful atman.

"By austerity a man achieves goodness, and through goodness he takes hold of the mind. Through the mind he reaches the self, and reaching the self he comes to rest."

—*Maitreya Upanishad*

SOURCE: Patrick Olivelle, *Samnyasa Upanishads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 160.

The progressive practice of yoga weakens the power of ignorance and egotistic desire that naturally distort human consciousness. The ultimate goal in yoga meditation is to dwell for extended periods in trance, reaching the highest state, an awareness that is perfectly at one with the atman. The yogin who reaches this state is said to put an end to all past karma and to experience moksha. A perfected yogin is thought to be omniscient and capable of supernormal feats, such as telepathy and clairvoyance. This enlightenment experience and the capacity to know others' tendencies and thoughts makes the yogic sage an ideal spiritual guide, or guru, for other religious seekers.

## OM ॐ

First appearing in the Upanishads, where it is described as the "seed sound" of all other sounds, OM (also written phonetically as "AUM") is one of the most prominent symbols of Hinduism. Repeated as part of almost every mantra for offerings and meditation as well as written calligraphically on icons and other symbols, OM is an ever-present symbol, often reflecting sectarian differences. Upandishadic interpretations developed in yoga, for example, teach that OM is a symbol of cosmic origination and dissolution. OM's components also include all four states of consciousness in yoga theory, with A as waking, U as dreaming, M as dreamless sleep, and the syllable as a whole "the fourth" reached only through trance meditation (samadhi). OM is the sound-form of *atman-Brahman*. Repeating OM is thus the key to meditation that leads to moksha. The written OM, shown in the title bar to this box, adorns all the major deities as represented in the popular art forms.

Sadhus (homeless wanderers) have been a part of the Hindu tradition for 3,000 years. Wandering Hindu ascetics today adhere to a variety of paths, from the bhakti (devotional) devotees to yogins seeking the divine without form.

# Premodern Hinduism: The Classical Era (180 BCE–900 CE)

The first great empire in South Asian history was that of the Mauryas (300–180 BCE), whose emperors helped to spread Buddhism and its ideal of compassion as a principle of just rule. As Buddhism expanded and thrived, it competed with early brahmin-led traditions.

Classical Hinduism, rooted in the Vedas, was also the product of response to Buddhism by the brahmin priests and spiritual teachers, synthesizing aspects of this missionary faith while also embracing pre-Aryan deities and other indigenous Indic traditions. As a result, nonviolence and vegetarianism became ideals of high-caste religiosity, Hindu monasteries for training and meditation were begun, and a distinctive theistic dimension of Hinduism found increasingly popular acceptance. Classical Hinduism in North India reaches a mature synthesis in the Gupta dynasty (320–647 CE), when wealth and the cultural expressions of devotional Hinduism flowered in all the fine arts. This tradition was so compelling that by 1200 CE, Hinduism had slowly absorbed the Buddha within its panoply of gods, and Buddhism largely disappeared from South Asia except for the Himalayan (Nepal) and Sri Lankan peripheries.

"This is the entire aim of yoga: rendering in personal experience of the Truth which universal nature had hidden in herself. . . . It is the conversion of the human soul into the divine soul and of natural life into divine living."

—Aurobindo Ghose

SOURCE: Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 155.

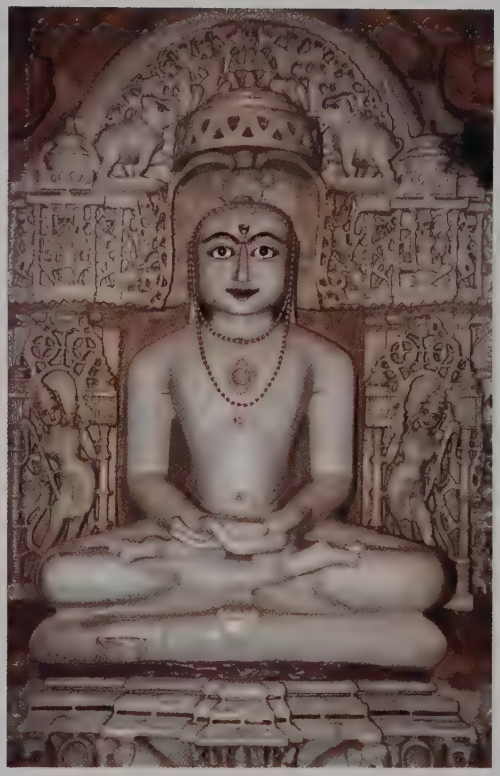
Brahmin writers in the classical age composed Sanskrit literature that codified and disseminated expressions of this new synthesis in philosophy, theology, and law. These texts and leaders unified the subcontinent with one fundamental paradigm: An individual's place in society is defined in terms of karma.

## Early Heterodox Indic Religions: Jainism and Buddhism

By 700 BCE, the religious movements of South Asia were especially diverse. Most were organized around brahmin teachers, who reinterpreted the Vedic sacrifice or sought new ascetic methods to experience ultimate reality. Most taught that the Veda was sacred and formed the bedrock of all revelation. From this time onward, the traditions that adopt this view and accept the legitimacy of caste and brahmin priesthood have been regarded by traditional scholars as "orthodox" Hindu schools.

Other charismatic teachers, however, formed organized Indic religions that did not accept the Veda, adopt the ideology of caste, or revere those born as brahmins. Indeed, they regarded brahmin ascetics as deluded. These heterodox religions—first Jainism and Buddhism in ancient times, and then Sikhism by 1520 CE—became world religions in their own right. Significantly, each heterodox tradition was founded by members of the warrior caste, each shaped a community of elite disciples who insured the movement's long-term survival, and each developed its own distinctive spiritual practices that won the loyalty of warriors and merchants. Buddhism is covered in Chapter 7 and Sikhism later in this chapter. But now, we turn our attention to Jainism.

## Jainism: The Tradition of Spiritual Conquerors



Marble statue of the saint Mahavira in meditation, enshrined in a Jain temple located in Jaisalmer, India.

Among the many seekers who retreated to the forests of ancient North India were some totally committed to liberation from death and rebirth. Little is known about most of these wanderers; aside from the Upanishads, the only accounts that survive are those of the few successful religions that emerged in this era, Buddhism and Jainism. Found now in parts of India as well as in small communities of East Africa, England, and North America, Jainism is a minor world religion, over 2,500 years old, with between 5 million and 8 million followers today.

Jain tradition records the existence of twenty-four sages who have realized the true nature of the world and discovered the only path to overcome human bondage in it. These sages are called **Tirthankaras** ("ford finders," referring to the shallow places where "fording," or crossing, a river is easiest). The last two Tirthankaras are Parsavanath (ca. 850 BCE) and Mahavira (599–527 BCE). The latter was influenced by the former, and both are revered for attaining release (moksha) from samsara by purifying their souls through rigorous ascetic life.

**Tirthankara:** great enlightened Jain Teacher, the last being Mahavira

While the Jain saints believed in samsara and moksha, their precise understanding of these is distinctive compared to the other great Indic religions. This world, they agree, is based on the suffering in samsara; unlike Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, however, to Jains samsara is real in a material sense, and not an illusion. The Jains believe the only solution to samsara is to escape it, and their sages taught that only through non-action can individuals find true happiness. This non-action involves stopping yourself from killing in any form, intentional or not. For Jains, non-killing is their supreme religious path.

Like the Upanishadic teachers, Jains regard the soul as the repository of all deeds. Although in itself a pure, clear entity, the soul is caught in a karmic trap, tarnished due to killing (intentional or not) done in this and previous lives. It is this killing karma residue that corrupts spiritual awareness. Total nonviolence in thought, word, and deed dissolves this residue; noninterference in all worldly connections is the only way to end even subtle violence. The religious life of Jain householders seeks to limit new karma that might further darken the soul; the religious occupation of monks and nuns is more intensive, seeking to stop altogether making any new karma as well as rapidly burn up the residue of the old.

> We forgive all living beings. We seek pardon from all living beings. We are friendly toward all living beings. And we seek enmity from no one.
>
> —Jain prayer

Purification of the soul by burning off the residue of past killing is the goal of all Jain practices. The householder majority undertake periodic fasts or periods of renunciation in pursuit of this goal. Others dedicate themselves to attain the highest goal of *samyak*

*darshan*, "complete intuition" into the world's workings. All Jains seek to develop "detachment and forgiveness," a mind that cultivates self-control and renunciation.

Jains believe that to achieve moksha requires taking monastic vows. With community support, the elite undertake more austere fasting, meditation, and scripture study. These three practices cause past karma to ripen prematurely and end karma quickly.

After Mahavira's death, the Jain community spread, attracting the patronage of ancient Indic kings. But around 310 BCE, the community split due to differences in interpretations of the rules of asceticism, the role of women, and which texts were authoritative. Some moved south; they called themselves the Digambara ("Sky-clad"), who require male monastic nakedness. This group believes the true texts were lost and so rely on treatises called the Prakaranas. Those who remained in the north called themselves the Svetambara ("white clad monks"). They held that their texts were the valid ones. In Svetambara Jainism, women are given a full spiritual place, and up until the present day, nuns far outnumber Svetambara monks. From antiquity until the modern era, these two groups developed in isolation. Yet despite some points of difference, they share many beliefs and practices, especially the view that only monastics can reach moksha.

By the fifth century CE, Jains began building temples housing images of the Tirthankaras. These temples included shrines to some Indic gods as well. Jains viewed gods not as world creators or sustainers, but merely as powerful beings still bound by karma who are destined to return for future rebirth. From this time, Jains integrated their religious tradition in the wider Hindu society. For example, gods affecting worldly life could be worshipped by Jain householders, even in Hindu temples. While Jains also accepted caste hierarchy, they rejected the doctrine that brahmins were born as spiritually superior human beings.

Jainism thus found a niche in the religious pluralism of South Asia over the last millennium. Jain businessmen—who worked hard, consumed modestly, emphasized education, and were masters of accommodation—have been extremely successful in many enterprises and served as lavish patrons of their faith, securing its future.

## The Reality of Karma and Caste

As we have seen, the idea of karma explains the destiny of every living being according to its moral past. Humans get what they deserve, though not necessarily in a single lifetime. This idea of karmic consequences had become widely accepted by the classical era, and brahmin social thinkers built on it to formulate the basis of the ideal Hindu society in a series of texts called the *Dharmashastras* (*Treatises on Dharma*). These texts, the most famous of which is known by the English title *The Laws of Manu*, make a series of arguments about karma while also describing practices and social policies designed to keep the world in order. They center on the policies needed to insure sacred social and cosmic order by extensively discussing ***dharma*** (holy duty).

**dharma:** "duty" determined by caste and gender

The *Dharmashastras* assume that one's birth location reveals one's karma. They also argue that high-status birth gives one a higher spiritual nature, reflecting one's good karmic past. Rebirth, then, is assumed to fall into regular patterns, and this natural process justifies seeing society as divided into groups with very separate natures and capacities. These groups have come to be called "castes" in English.

Hindu law codes became the basis of Indian law in the early classical period. They prescribed that those born into a caste should marry within that group. Such individuals were believed to have closely matching karma. If they married and had children within their group, ideal reincarnation patterns should be maintained. Each of the four main castes had its own traditional tasks: *Brahmins* were masters of the Vedic and ritual practice, *kshatriyas* were rulers and protectors of society, *vaishyas* specialized in artisanship and trade, and *shudras* performed the labor and menial tasks for those in the upper castes. In reality, however, each of these four main castes is composed of hundreds of subgroups, which to this day vary regionally in their surnames and specific social functions. It is important to note that, in antiquity as well as the present day, intercaste marriages, political events, and local history resulted in much more social flexibility than is prescribed in the brahmanical texts.

Each caste was thought to have a singular proper duty to perform in life; the term for this, *dharma*, is a central idea throughout the subsequent history of Hinduism. The *Dharmashastras* argue that one must live according to the rules of the group and gender one is born into, which has been determined by the karma of earlier lives. Only by doing one's own dharma can one make the good karma needed to move "upward" in samsara. As one passage in *The Laws of Manu* (10:97) warns, "Better to do one's own dharma badly than another caste's dharma well."

Hindu religious law therefore does not see all human beings as having the same social and religious status or as being subject to the same legal standards. While religious views underlie this system of social inequality, Hindu social theorists argued that, in the fullness of time, samsara and its law of karmic retribution allow for cosmic justice, matching karmic past to social function. In the end, every soul will move upward through samsara to be reborn as a brahmin male and reach liberation. Individual freedom must be sacrificed for harmony and for society's ultimate and eventual collective liberation.

Thus, in theory, the religious underpinning of the caste system has legitimated the social hierarchy. It preserves the purity and privileges of the highest castes and argues that society depends on brahmins: If they live in purity and use their ritual mastery to worship the gods properly, they ensure that divine grace will sustain a successful society. Consistent with this belief system, high-caste Hindus view their superior status as based upon exemplary actions in previous lives. Yet as we shall see, this sanctioning of high-caste privilege had early critics among Buddhists and Jains and, later, among Sikhs as well.

Classical Hindu writers also prescribed other endeavors to realize the ideal Hindu life. We now consider how the individual was expected to fulfill his or her dharma.

## The Four Stages and Four Aims of Life

Hindu texts describe four stages and four aims of life. These four stages are:

1. The student
2. The householder
3. The forest dweller
4. The homeless wanderer

The male student studies in the house of his teacher. What he studies depends on his caste and ability, but all are to memorize portions of Vedas as well as become proficient in archery, medicine, astrology, and music.

Upon completing the student phase, a man marries and becomes a householder. In this second stage of life, his duty is to perform the traditional rites and raise his children to continue his lineage. The *Dharmashastras* require women to subordinate themselves to men, though husbands are supposed to respect their wives and maintain happiness within the household. Marriage is treated as a sacrament, and divorce is not allowed.

A sadhu Hindu ascetic, coated in ash, consults a ritual text.

In the third stage, when a couple finds the household well handled by their male descendants, they become forest dwellers. They focus on spiritual matters by retreating to the forest, living only on wild foods and renouncing sex. Their chief concerns are rituals and meditation.

The fourth stage of life, the homeless wanderer (*sadhu*), begins when the forest dweller is close to moksha realization. Persons now wander alone. No rituals need be done, and they renounce all but what can be carried. Their remaining days are devoted to pilgrimages and to yoga practice.

Since individuals differ in their karma-determined capabilities according to caste and stage of life, the *Dharmashastras* also identified four aims of life:

1. Material gain/worldly success (*artha*)
2. Sensory pleasure (*kama*)
3. Fulfilment of duty (dharma)
4. Release from the cycle of birth and death (moksha)

The first aim, artha, is reflected in South Asian folk literature of animal stories and human parables. These stories impart instructions toward this goal in life, an

indication that belief in karma can coexist for pious Hindus with an interest in material success.

The second aim, kama, was an acceptable goal for householders seeking to fulfill the duty of propagating the family line. Many in the West have heard of the *Kama Sutra*, which discusses sexual pleasure as well as many other ways to achieve satisfaction in life.

The third aim, dharma, we have already discussed. The other aims of life are justly pursued only if they remain consistent with one's caste and gender-appropriate duties.

The last of the four aims, moksha, is adopted by few, but the texts counsel that everyone should respect and support through almsgiving those who pursue this aim. Hindus still venerate the sadhu saints, who follow this path of spiritual wandering.

## Epics and the Development of Classical Hinduism

For the majority of Hindus, theology, law, and the models for religious life are conveyed in the sacred stories and by characters in the great epics: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. By the classical era, these enormous narrative texts had been written down from oral sources that originated in accounts of early battles fought by warriors in the ancient Aryan clans.

The *Mahabharata* records a devastating feud between rival sides of a family as they vied for control of the northern plains, with each family aided by supernatural allies. One side has usurped power from the other, but the rightful heir has no desire to shed the blood of his kin to take it back. This dilemma provides the moral element of the story. This rivalry ended in a war of immense carnage that in theological interpretation marks the onset of the current dark age, the **Kali Yuga**. The *Mahabharata* (especially its most famous portion, the ***Bhagavad Gita***) presents diverse and nuanced discussions of dharma, especially that pertaining to warriors, kin, and women. It also describes the role of divinity in human affairs. The epic reveals the many difficulties and paradoxes that face those who wish to apply the religious ideals of the *Dharmashastras* to ambiguous real-life circumstances.

**Kali Yuga:** the dark age in which the world is currently

***Bhagavad Gita*:** Hindu scripture extolling the divinity of Krishna and yogas needed for liberation; part of the epic *Mahabharata*

In the second great epic, the *Ramayana*, the underlying historical circumstance is the rivalry between one Aryan clan—symbolized by the hero Rama—and the non-Aryans of the south, portrayed as powerful demons subject to unbridled lust, immorality, and disrespect for Vedic sacrifices. Invoking the forces of nature and his animal allies, Rama defeats the demon Ravana, who had kidnapped his wife Sita; he then returns home to Ayodhya, where he rules over a righteous Hindu kingdom. The tale has provided groups across South (and Southeast) Asia a narrative to express their own views on ethnic relations, what makes a good king, gender relations, and the relationship between northerners and southerners. In fact, there is no single *Ramayana* today, for through its telling and retellings, hundreds of groups have claimed their particular version as sacred and central to their own Hindu ideal.

## Mainstream Hinduism and the Rise of Devotion to the Great Deities

**puranas:** popular texts extolling glories of Hindu deities

Most of the deities who became the focus of Hindu devotional life by the classical age differed from those of the earliest Vedic hymns. An entirely new collection of Sanskrit texts, called ***puranas***, was composed to describe these great gods, specify their forms of worship, and celebrate the early saints who cultivated divine love for them. The purana stories recount examples of divine incarnation, instances of the gods intervening in the human world, and episodes of their bestowing blessings on devotees. Heroes in these stories have long been models of exemplary devotional faith, or ***bhakti***.

**bhakti:** devotionalism to a Hindu divinity

All the puranas share an important assumption about humanity living in the Kali Yuga, the current and "dark" post-Vedic age. This era, said to have begun in 3102 BCE, is defined as the period of degeneration, in which human spiritual potential is declining. The puranas declare that the deities have extended their grace to humanity in return for their followers' unselfish devotion. While the ascetic practices of yoga do not end (and not all Hindus accepted Kali Yuga theory), this ideal of bhakti, the full commitment of heart and mind to devotional practice, became the predominant one for Hinduism from the classical era until the present day.

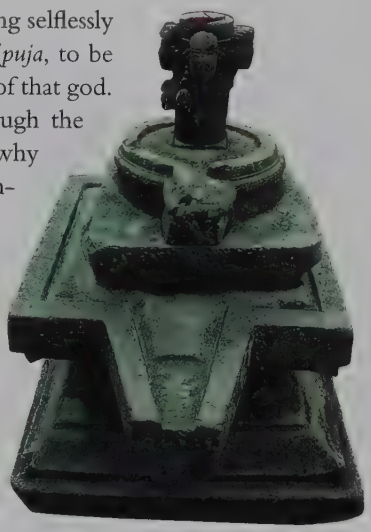
Hinduism's shift toward bhakti merges a new theology with the fundamental ideas of the formative era: samsara, karma, and moksha. The devotional tradition accepts the early model but builds on it by asserting that the great deities, such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga, have the power to reward devotion by altering the karma of the *bhakta* (devotee). By absorbing human karma, these deities can bring their grace to persons seeking moksha. This view is most dramatically expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita,* where the deity Krishna argues that desireless action is possible only through egoless bhakti faith and that the true suspension of all action is impossible (since all action inevitably produces additional karma).

By the classical era, purana texts asserted the existence of 330 million Hindu deities. How could the theologians account for such incredible diversity? The bhakti saints and theologians argued that the existence of countless gods reflects the grace of the divine, since the overwhelming needs of a humanity comprising innumerable individual karmas could only be met by such an enormous number of gods. The challenge for each Hindu is to find and focus on the one deity whose form is most appropriate to his or her level of spiritual maturity.

In later Hinduism, each devotee chooses a personal deity to be at the center of his or her religious life, a focus for personal communion through an emotional relationship. Although most teachers (and families) believed that Hindus should respect all the great deities as well as lesser, local spirits, it was nonetheless essential for each person to establish a single divinity to venerate as a channel for grace. Among theologians, the terms and mechanisms of liberation vary; in many of the puranas, rebirth in one's chosen deity's heaven—not exit from samsara—is proclaimed as the highest human goal devotees need strive for.

The concept of "chosen deity" requires knowing extensively and loving selflessly that particular god. This meant rendering homage and making offerings (*puja*, to be discussed later in this chapter), meditating, and studying the purana stories of that god.

Each of the great deities of Hinduism has come to be known through the purana texts, and theologians provide different explanations for how and why the divine beings have manifested themselves to save humanity from mundane dangers and to bestow ultimate liberation. In the following sections, we'll examine the great deities in more detail, starting with the tradition's most popular and lovable divinity.



A linga, the image commonly used to worship Shiva.

## *Ganesh*

Judged by the number of shrines and the universality of his image, the elephant-headed Ganesh is the tradition's most popular divinity. Most Hindus worship Ganesh not as a divinity who will help them achieve liberation but more to secure his aid in worldly life, in overcoming obstacles. With a potbelly and love of sweets signaling his sensual orientation, Ganesh, who is commonly honored with offerings at the start of most rituals and journeys, is regarded as the kind, "fix-it" god in the pantheon.

## *Shiva*

The ***Shaivite***, or one whose chosen deity is Shiva, focuses on two beliefs: that Shiva's essence is found in all creative energies in this world, and that one can find one's own divine nature by dedicating bhakti practice to this lord. As described in the puranas, Shiva merges opposing sides of Hindu life: He is both the ideal ascetic revered by yogins and the successful householder who marries the goddess Parvati and fathers the divine sons Ganesh and Kumar.

**Shaivite:** devotee of Shiva

In Hindu legend, Shiva saves the world repeatedly and requites devotion with his grace. However, Shiva also has a wrathful side and can punish humans as well. The puranas attribute to Shiva the periodic cosmic upheavals that return the universe to a formless, empty resting state. The sectarian Shaivite theologians see the linking of world creation, fertility, and destruction as signifying Shiva's omnipresence, making him the supreme "Great God."

## *Vishnu and His Avataras, Rama and Krishna*

Although they may respect Shiva, Vishnu devotees (***Vaishnavites***) believe that their chosen deity is the one who truly underlies all reality. Vishnu alone is mentioned in the Vedas. He alone begets the god Brahma, who then begins each cosmic cycle of creation.

**Vaishnavite:** devotee of Vishnu

The great theme of Vishnu theology is that of incarnation. The puranas dedicated to him recount many episodes in the earth's history when demons threatened creation. At these times, Vishnu assumed the form of whatever was needed to smash the threat. Some of these incarnations, or ***avataras***, were animals, but most were

**avataras:** incarnations of a god that descend to earth to assist creation and fight evil

Elephant-headed Ganesh, god of success, is found in every Hindu community. He is always worshipped first and before any major undertaking.

Bearing a mace, a discus, and a conch, Vishnu is represented as Lord of the Universe.

human heroes. The texts also suggest Vishnu's role in humanity's future liberation. One avatara, Kalki, is expected to come riding on a white horse to guide humanity as the Kali Yuga turns darker. Although the names and number of avataras vary, two of the most important and widely accepted are Rama and Krishna.

We have already encountered Rama, hero of the *Ramayana*, who slays the demon Ravana and reveals the ideal of proper filial obedience to parents, loyalty to brothers, and the exemplary conduct of Hindu kings. His alliance with the monkey leader Hanuman also signals the ideal of harmonizing the divine with the natural world. A second form of Rama is one dedicated to destroying any evil kings who would disturb brahmins or their rituals.

The most complex and multifaceted of the Vishnu avataras, Krishna is revered in many forms: the infant trickster god, whose every prank and every gesture reveal his underlying divinity; the child who as "the butter thief" also steals the hearts of the world's mothers and fathers; the brave youth who rescues villagers from the poison of evil serpent deities and from the cruel rains sent by the Vedic god

Indra; and the divine paramour and consort of the female cowherds. Finally, Krishna is the mature guru who offers counsel about the necessity of serving the world according to one's dharma. Many of his sectarian devotees believe that Krishna is in fact the reality from which all the gods originate.

## *The Devis*

As with human society, Hindus experienced the divine as divided into male and female beings; perhaps from a tradition originating among the pre-Aryan indigenous peoples, later Hindus came to believe that goddesses are born of the earth, residing in mountains and rivers. Across South Asia, these are referred to as *Devi* in a generalized way, and with names specific to special incarnations that, like the male gods, arose to assist humans with their problems (e.g., drought) and, especially, with predations of powerful demons. Early Indian art depicts the fertile, creative power of the universe in scenes where a young woman touches a tree, her innate energy (***shakti***) causing it to burst into bloom. Those who predominantly worship goddesses are called ***shaktas***, and theirs is the third general group among Hindu deity worshippers, alongside Vaishnavites and Shaivites.

The earth goddess may be addressed as Ambika ("Mother"), Sita ("[born of the] tilled furrow"), or Sati ("the Virtuous"). All these forms draw on the creative, mothering female force. Another widespread and primordial sense of female divinity is that associated with destruction; this has been primarily in the form of the smallpox goddess, called Shitala or Ajima.

Yet other related female forms are the goddesses who destroy demons that threaten the world: Durga and Kali. Those needing to confront death to become spiritually mature can make Kali their chosen deity. To visualize the dance of Kali means seeing that life is inevitably surrounded by death and understanding that the gift of human life should not be wasted. Devotional communion with Durga and Kali typically requires bhaktas to offer them blood through animal sacrifice to secure their blessings.

Hindu theology also views the pantheon as balancing the unique powers of male and female. The cosmos, like the human species, is seen as created and sustained by the same combination of gender energies: the male shakta and the female shakti. Each is incomplete and even dangerous without the balancing influence of the other. Thus, the puranas describe Hindu deities as married. We shall see later how tantric Hinduism carries the implications of this theology into individual yoga practice.

"O Mother! Thou art present in every form;
Thou art the universe and in its tiniest and most trifling things.
Wherever I go and wherever I look,
I see Thee, Mother, present in thy cosmic form.
The whole earth—earth, water, fire, air—
Are all thy forms, O Mother, the whole world of birth and death."

SOURCE: David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 116.

**shakti:** innate, creative force of this universe, understood as feminine

**shaktas:** devotees of Devi

Durga, riding her vehicle, the tiger, carries the weapons of the male gods.

## The Dance of Shiva

One of the most lyrical and evocative symbols of Hinduism is that of Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of the Dance. The upper right hand holds the twin-sided drum, from which sacred sound emerges, counting time and originating sound's creative resonance. The opposite hand holds a flame; Shiva's holding a fire points to his being a refuge to followers in the fires of samsara. Fire also alludes to this deity's role as destroyer at the end of a great world era. Both hands move together in Shiva's great dance, ceaselessly integrating cosmic creation and destruction, including all the gods. Another hand shows the "fear-not" gesture, and the fourth points to his upraised foot, the place Hindu devotees touch most often in ritual. Shiva dances while treading on a demon who symbolizes delusion. Thus, to enter into the Dance of Shiva means to brave the circle of rebirth, transcend the limitations of time and apparent opposites, and join with the divine powers of the great deity whose grace and eternal energy can remove spiritual obstacles. Because the cosmos has become a manifestation of Shiva's power, a dance done simply for the purpose of his own divine entertainment, individuals can find union with Shiva wherever they can cultivate artistic pleasure.

Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance: twelfth-century bronze image from southern India.

# Premodern Hinduism: The Postclassical Era (900–1500 CE)

### The Formation of Major Hindu Schools of Thought

During the late classical era, the brahmin elite systematically delineated a number of central philosophical systems. These texts became, and have remained, authoritative for the tradition. Every school's texts sought to explain the nature of the physical world, the boundaries of individuality, the basis for establishing human knowledge, and the means to liberation. All told, these texts and the epics comprise an extraordinarily large sacred literary tradition.

These orthodox schools formed in part to oppose the heterodox philosophies espoused by advocates of Buddhism and Jainism and to affirm the authority of the Veda. Those discussed here were highly influential intellectual traditions, whose basic ideas infused Hindu society.

### *Sankhya*

One of the oldest systematic philosophy schools to appear, the Sankhya school's ideas were especially important in subsequent Hindu thought. Sankhya (literally, "analysis") posits a dualistic universe of matter (*prakriti*) bonded in various combinations with spirit (*purusha*). Both matter and spirit are eternal, with an infinite number of purushas eternally distinct from one another.

Sankhya admits the reality of gods but denies the existence of a transcendent, personal God. The purpose of spiritual life is isolating purusha from prakriti. Sankhya's differentiation of spirit–matter combinations, which has informed Hindu culture to the present, is applied to the analysis of human personality, gender, species, the seasons, aesthetics, medicine, and even foods.

One typical use of Sankhya theory is to assess the spiritual status of human beings. All beings are combinations of three primary material qualities or "strands" that bind spirit to the material world: *sattva* (associated with purity, goodness, subtlety), *rajas* (passion, raw energy), and *tamas* (darkness, inertia, grossness). In the Sankhya view, too, even the gods are qualitatively similar to humans, different only by having more sattva. This school thereby sees the incarnation of divinities in human form as part of the universe's natural processes.

### *Advaita Vedanta*

**monism:** belief in the one impersonal ultimate reality

**Shankara:** influential Hindu philosopher, advocating the impersonal ultimate reality

**avidya:** existential ignorance

**maya:** force of illusion clouding human minds

The Advaita Vedanta school is monistic; that is, it regards the singular reality of the universe as impersonal spirit without differentiation. This unqualified **monism** draws on the Upanishads' formula of Brahman = atman. This school of thought became the prevailing elite scholastic philosophy of South Asia after 500 CE, and it is most often emphasized by modern Hindu reformers. Advaita Vedanta's enduring central place among Hindu philosophies was due to the brilliance of the great philosopher **Shankara** (ca. 788–820). His commentaries and treatises received additional exposure through public debates with proponents of other schools.

Shankara argued that because of spiritual ignorance (***avidya***) that confuses our minds in a cloud of illusion (***maya***), we construct an ego that leads us to think that we are different from Brahman. Only through textual study, the guidance of a guru, faith, intuition, and yoga practice can this ignorance be removed, and one realizes that our person is nothing but Brahman. Moksha is then possible.

**saguna Brahman:** human form of the world spirit

Shankara admitted that one could in elementary and intermediate stages of spiritual development relate to Brahman as a personal divinity with human characteristics (*saguna*) such as power and grace (**saguna Brahman**). But ultimately, moksha can be achieved only by going beyond this projection of a deity in terms of human

## An Analogy for Vedanta's Central Truth

The limited space in an earthen pot is like the atman, the infinite space outside the pot is like Brahman, and the wall of the pot is like the ego. As soon as the earthen pot is broken, the space inside the pot merges with the infinite space beyond it. Likewise, once the ego, a product of ignorance, is abandoned, atman merges with Brahman, becoming indistinguishable.

**nirguna Brahman:** impersonal form of the world spirit

characteristics to experience Brahman by merging one's own soul with **nirguna Brahman**—that is, reality "without characteristics."

Shankara also organized the first great network of Hindu monasteries (*mathas*) that supported male ascetics; the rule of conduct specified vegetarianism, dress in an ochre robe, use of a walking staff, and horizontal forehead markings. This monastic order grew, expanded, and survives to this day.

### *The Theology of Qualified Monism: Vishishta Advaita*

**Ramanuja:** Influential theologian who emphasized worship of Brahman as Vishnu

While Shankara's monistic thought and practice appealed to intellectuals and ascetics, it was quite different from the religious experience of most devotees who revered the gods. It remained for later theologians, particularly **Ramanuja** (ca. 1025–1137), to link scholastic theology with popular theistic practice. Ramanuja argued that human beings could not really recognize the divine, except in the perceivable world. Why? Since Brahman pervades all reality, the religious path to moksha cannot—and need not—proceed beyond saguna Brahman.

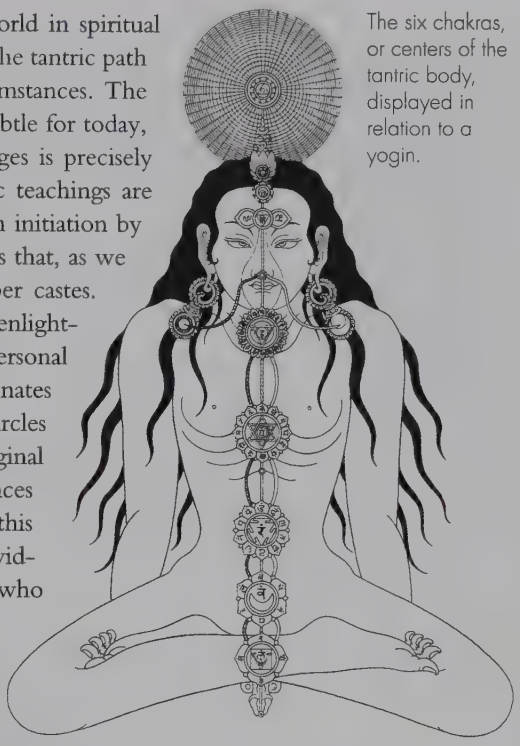
**tantra:** esoteric practices leading to moksha

Like Shankara, Ramanuja wrote his own commentary on the Upanishads, but he reached a very different conclusion about their ultimate spiritual truth being a theistic revelation. He emphasized Vishnu as the form of Brahman most effectively worshipped. Ramanuja in fact asserted that each individual is ultimately a fragment of Vishnu, wholly dependent on him, and that a perfect understanding of this could be realized only through intense devotion (*bhakti yoga*). This theology also holds that souls do not ultimately merge with Brahman, maintaining a "separate nondifference" even in moksha.

Shri Yantra, symbol of the goddess used in meditation.

### *Tantric Hinduism*

A major innovation of post–classical era Hinduism was **tantra**. Like the bhakti theology already mentioned, the tantric tradition built on earlier ideas and practices but advocated new forms of spiritual experience. The name *tantra* relates to weaving—in this case, likely indicating the interweaving of teaching and texts. The emergence of tantra can be seen in both Hinduism and Buddhism, indicating how thoroughly these later traditions affected each other.



The six chakras, or centers of the tantric body, displayed in relation to a yogin.

Tantric teachers accepted the Kali Yuga theory of a world in spiritual decline, and their texts typically begin by underscoring how the tantric path to liberation in this lifetime is suited for its degraded circumstances. The assumption is that what worked for the Vedic sages is too subtle for today, and that what was prohibited to the seeker in the Vedic ages is precisely what is needed now for spiritual breakthrough. But tantric teachings are not given openly or universally. They are bestowed through initiation by teachers only to those deemed capable of practicing methods that, as we shall see, contradict the dharma-based morality of the upper castes. There are many tantric traditions, each deriving from an enlightened saint called a ***siddha***, who discovered in an intensive personal quest a method of meditation and understanding that culminates in moksha. This personal lineage was passed down in small circles following specific beliefs and practices derived from the original master. The unorthodox practices and extraordinary experiences were thought to be dangerous for those unready for them; this made the siddha teachers wary of instructing unproven individuals and led them to prescribe dire penalties for any initiate who revealed anything about tantric practice to outsiders.

All the tantric paths are rooted in the ancient yoga traditions we have discussed. But tantric yoga goes further: It regards the body as a microcosm of the universe; all bodily energies, if harnessed and focused, are capable of producing a transformative religious experience. What is distinctive in tantric yoga is focus on the primal energies of male (shakta) and female (shakti). Thus, tantra incorporated the devotional worship of female deities in union with their consorts. Many tantric teachings prescribe the practice of ritualized sexual union during which both partners visualize themselves as divinities, cultivating in each other an enlightened awakening through the combined transformative energies that arise through their union. The goal is realization of the one universal, blissful spirit that is beyond all duality, including gender.

**siddha:** tantric saint

Tantric yoga entails mastering complex rituals and practices that invert caste-based status and gender hierarchy norms. Places of tantric practice include cremation grounds, the most polluted ritual sites; ritual implements include human bones and skulls. The sexual yoga and the use of forbidden foods (meat, fish, and alcohol that are otherwise unacceptable for high-caste groups) shocked orthodoxy, but they were deployed for the highly traditional goal of freeing the individual's mind from all worldly attachments in order to realize moksha.

While tantra was at first a "counterculture" juxtaposed against orthodox Hinduism, its influence slowly grew, even among the high castes. Later, tantric ideas shaped Hindu rituals profoundly, as priests experienced in tantric practice devised procedures to focus the powers of the universe, revising many ancient rituals. Today's Hindu rituals keep the older, outward practices for the general public and, at the same time, communicate the inner truths for those attuned to esoteric tantric symbolisms.

"In men of animal nature, Shakti sleeps, but for tantrics she is wide awake. He who serves shakti is the 'true worshipper.' Whoever knows the rapture of the soul's union with the ultimate is the true adept at lovemaking. All others are merely enjoyers of women."

—Kularnava Tantra V. 107–113

SOURCE: India Sinha, *Tantra: The Cult of Ecstasy* (London: Hamlyn, 1993), p. 144.

## The Early Islamic Era: Delhi Sultanate (1192–1525)

Soon after the conversion of central Asian and Turkic peoples to Islam in the first centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632 CE), Muslim converts came to South Asia, and the region began to absorb Islamic influences. Muslim traders enhanced transregional trade and settled in caravan and port towns. They built mosques and eventually brought religious scholars and clerical authorities to guide the slowly growing Islamic communities. The conquest of northern India by Ghuride armies from central Asia (1192) defeated the Hindu kings.

Over 500 years of Muslim rule in South Asia followed, an era of increasingly centralized government. In many areas, Muslims displaced kshatriyas as heads of regional states; in many other places, Hindu rulers continued as their tribute-paying vassals. The Delhi Sultanate included the northern sections of modern Pakistan and India, from the Indus to the Upper Ganges. In general, authorities of the sultanate did not attempt to regulate indigenous religion, and Hindu traditions continued. Indeed, the great bhakti saints who rose to prominence in this era have dominated the popular Hindu devotional imagination ever since.

## Religion in the Mughal Era (1526–1707)

The great Mughal Empire that controlled northern and central India from 1526 until 1707 represented the second era of Muslim rule across much of South Asia. In its first century, Mughal rule was a prosperous and peaceful era in which Indo-Islamic culture flourished, especially in architecture and the fine arts. The Taj Mahal in Agra is the most famous among hundreds of magnificent buildings erected during this period. There was also a significant rise in converts to Islam across North India during the Mughal dynasty.

## The Rise of Sikhism

One of the principal bhakti saints, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), achieved unparalleled success as founder of the last great heterodox religion to originate in India, Sikhism. His disciples now number over 30 million, eclipsing the number of Jews in global population.

Guru Nanak was born before the beginning of Mughal rule. A member of the warrior caste, he was well-educated in the religious literatures of Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. By the age of twenty-nine, Nanak was married, the father of two children, and employed as a civil servant. In 1498, a three-day mystical religious experience changed his life. His first pronouncement after a long silence indicated the vision that he would pursue: "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the path that I follow is God's."[4]

For the next twenty years, Nanak wandered as a pilgrim. He was drawn to answer the paradoxical question of why, if God is one and indivisible, humanity should be divided into competing and very different faiths. Conveyed in poetry and song, his spiritual experiences and moral teachings were collected and recorded in the **Janam Sakhis**, the traditional stories about his life that include encounters with animals, rulers, commoners, and holy men—Hindu sadhus and Muslim Sufis alike. Legends concerning Nanak's life describe his travels throughout South Asia and his visits to Tibet and Mecca. His spiritual understanding and supernormal powers are said to surpass those of all others everywhere. Sikh tradition holds that Nanak respected both Hindu and Islamic traditions, but that his mission was to correct the mistaken practices and beliefs that humans had added to both, thereby revealing the full spiritual truth and the proper path to realize it.

When he returned home from his wandering at age fifty, Nanak set out to do just this. Back in the Punjab, he taught all who were interested and soon attracted many disciples, known as *Sikhs*, who were drawn by the community whose rules and rituals he established. Convinced that the caste system was wrong, Nanak had all his disciples eat as one family from a common kitchen, without hierarchy; he also insisted that women deserved respect and religious equality. Many across North India were drawn to this charismatic guru as well as the reformist community he created, which offered an indigenous monotheistic alternative to Islam.

Nanak also continued to compose religious verse, with 974 hymns incorporated into the Adi Granth. These formed the core of the Sikh scriptures compiled by his successor a half century later. After designating his successor, Nanak died in 1539.

Of women we are
born, of women
conceived,
To a woman engaged,
to woman married
Woman we befriend,
by women is civiliza-
tion continued....
It is by woman that
order is maintained
Then why call her evil
from whom great
men are born?

—Sikh hymn

SOURCE: Patwant Singh, *The Sikhs* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 27.

**Janam Sakhis:** traditional stories about the life and teachings of Guru Nanak

## *The Ten Gurus and the Development of the Sikh Community*

After Nanak, there were a succession of nine other gurus who led the burgeoning Sikh community that expanded across the region. The second and third gurus gathered the songs and sermons composed by Nanak, adding hymns of their own and those composed by Hindu saints and Muslim Sufis, to form the holy scripture called the **Adi Granth**. This text, containing over 7,000 hymns, remains the unique focus of Sikh worship to this day and is organized in chronological order, beginning with hymns composed by Nanak, then hymns composed by the other gurus, followed by the hymns of other saints. Each hymn came to have its own traditional tune for singing.

**Adi Granth:** scripture worshipped by Sikhs

The town of Amritsar ("Pool of Ambrosia") in India was built and became the center of the faith up to the present day. Its Golden Temple, set in a lake, is the crown jewel of Sikh architecture. Tradition holds that the site on which the Golden Temple stands was sanctified by a visit from Guru Nanak, who instructed his successors to develop the area into a great spiritual center that would radiate a message of love and peace to humanity. The tenth guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), declared that in the future, the guru of the Sikhs in spiritual matters would be the holy text itself, when the second name for it became the Guru Granth Sahib. From when this temple was opened in 1604, every day until the present, this text has been taken out and its hymns chanted from dawn until dusk.

Traditional image of Guru Nanak.

In the early years of Mughal rule, the Sikhs gained popularity and were welcomed at court. The emperor Akbar (1561–1605) found in the faith a tolerant, monotheistic theology and regarded the followers as a disciplined moral community. Akbar's successors, however, felt distrustful about the Sikhs' growth and political influences. The fifth guru, Arjan (1581–1606), was tortured and martyred on the order of one emperor. In 1669, when another Mughal ruler ordered all Hindu temples and schools demolished, Sikhs resisted, and many died defending their faith. It was in response to this growing persecution that the Sikh tradition came to emphasize training in martial skills and bravery in defending the community. A group called the **Khalsa** ("The Pure") was formed, a dedicated and elite order of men and women ready to struggle and, if necessary, die in defense of the faith. Training camps in archery, swordsmanship, and cavalry fighting were established to empower men to perform this religious duty. The Khalsa, who adopted a strict lifestyle as guardians of the faith, marked themselves by their appearance: uncut hair (covered with a turban), short trousers, steel wristlet, comb, and sword. Sikhs in the Khalsa also adopted the names Singh ("lion") for men and Kaur ("princess") for women, to eliminate caste distinctions within the community.

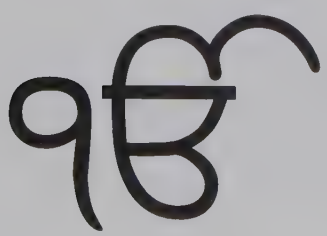
**Khalsa:** "The Pure"; Sikh organization for defense of the faith

## *Sikh Theology, Morality, and Spiritual Practices*

Nanak's spiritual path contained elements found in both Hindu and Muslim traditions. As in Islam, Nanak taught that there is only one God, who never walked the earth as a man (i.e., had not had an incarnation). Nanak also set his teaching firmly in the Hindu nirguna tradition, mystically affirming that this God is entirely beyond form and human categories. To specify this God, Nanak introduced the terms **Om-kara** ("Divine One") and **Sat Guru** ("True Teacher").

Anticipating reformers of colonial and postcolonial Hinduism, Sikhs deny that asceticism is necessary, asserting that householders are perfectly capable of realizing the highest goal of liberation. Similarly, they say that ritual acts and pilgrimages have no spiritual effect. In addition, they reject the authority of the Vedas and the innate sanctity of the brahmin caste. The Sikhs' non-Vedic orientation has caused high-caste Hindus to regard them as heterodox.

In the Gurmukhī script, *Ek Onkar* is a combination of three letters: *Ek*, *Aum*, and *Kar*, which is a line drawn over the Om, signifying continuity, timelessness, and eternity.



Residing in the human heart and communicating with those who live rightly and develop their spiritual faculties, Sat Guru freely bestows grace that ends individual karma and rebirth. In Sikh spiritual understanding, the human struggle involves rejecting ego-centered living and embracing

the divine Sat Guru within. Revelation occurs through the effect of divine sound on one's consciousness. The Adi Granth is the center of their rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, Sikh religiosity is centered on listening to, and congregationally singing, the hymns composed by Nanak and other saints and sitting in the presence of the holy book, whose very words both reflect and impart this grace.

Rejecting caste norms while living among a Hindu majority, Sikhs affirm the social equality of all humanity, regardless of caste, race, creed, or gender. As already mentioned, women can join the Khalsa, and following the views of Nanak, Sikh women were emancipated from conformity to the gender practices of both Islam and Hinduism. They were not required to wear veils, widows could remarry, and women could be religious preachers and the political heads of administrative districts in the fledgling Sikh states in the Punjab. All Sikhs, however, are expected to refrain from drugs, including tobacco and alcohol, and many do not eat meat. Community service is an important and expected expression of faith; hard work and attaining wealth is encouraged; onerous work undertaken for others is highly respected. Being fit and active in defense of the weak and oppressed is an important part of the Sikh lifestyle.

There is no priesthood or ordained ministry in Sikhism; men and women pray together. To become a Sikh requires making a profession of belief, affirming the essentials of nirguna theology and the need for each individual to earn liberation.

Sikhs find their liberation in combining public and private worship with social action, earning an honest living, giving alms, and doing community service. The great sixth guru, Hargobind (1595–1644), established the Sikhs' main religious institution, the ***gurudwara***, based on the teachings and examples of Nanak. This architectural and institutional form provides a common focal point for Sikh devotion and a place for communal gathering. The gurudwara hall is typically plain and undecorated, completely lacking in images. At one end is a raised platform with a silk covering on which a copy of the Adi Granth is central. From dawn until dusk, a learned member of the community reads and sings from the text; those Sikhs in attendance can join in the singing as they sit below the text on the floor, which is covered with white cloth.

"Omkar
True name
Being who creates
Beyond fear and
opposition
A form beyond time
Unborn, self-born
The guru's grace."
—Nanak

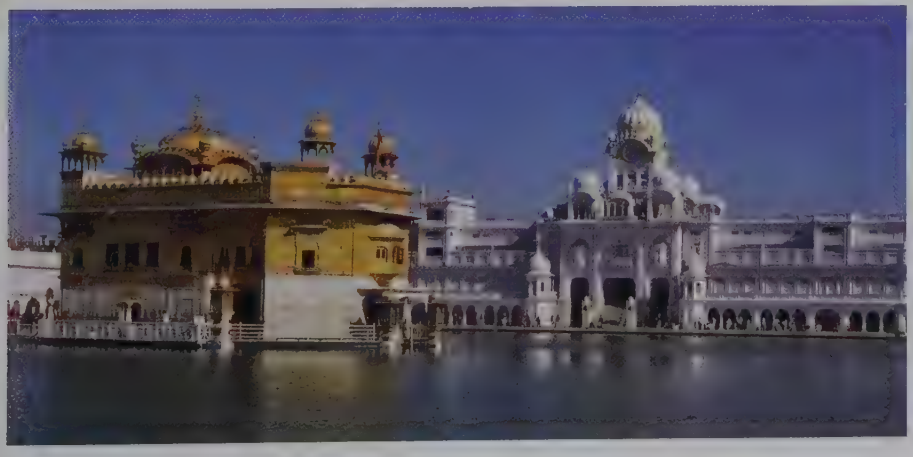
SOURCE: John Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer. *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 78.

There is one God, his
name is truth eternal
He is the creator
of all things, the
all-pervading spirit
Fearless and without
hatred, timeless and
formless.
Beyond birth and
death, he is
self-enlightened.
He is known by the
Guru's grace.[5]

**Om-kara:** "Divine One"; Sikh term for the formless ultimate reality

**Sat Guru:** "True Teacher"; Sikh term indicating the active mode of Om-kara

**gurudwara:** Sikh temple



The Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. This great landmark for Sikhs worldwide, and the faith's chief pilgrimage center, was occupied in the early 1980s by militants seeking Punjab's secession from India.

Any time the text is opened in the gurudwara, a member of the community must sit by it, just as a human guru must have a disciple in attendance. Without a priesthood in Sikhism, anyone can give teachings or read the scripture. This sanctuary can also accommodate individuals coming for prayer or meditation at any time.

The gurudwaras also contain a common kitchen where community vegetarian meals are prepared for all who come and where all eat together. Thus, kitchen service reflects the moral teachings of Sikhism: the centrality of community, its egalitarian nature, and social action. Within India's Hindu caste society, the Sikh religious lifestyle and social norms were revolutionary, bringing all members together regardless of caste and station in life. Today, the serving of community meals for all needing to eat is a central practice. It is a form of service to the poor seen every day at the Golden Temple in Amritsar and in Sikh communities globally. Its spirit is reflected in the aphorism "Where there are Sikhs, there is no hunger." During the coronavirus crisis of 2020, for example, Sikhs across the United States set up kitchens that fed all those needing meals.

## Hinduism and Modernity

In the modern period, Hindu tradition continues, with global influences entering the South Asian experience. Although South Asians vigorously preserve elements of premodern religious culture, many have adopted new beliefs and practices. Scientific ideas associated with the Enlightenment affected nearly everyone through education, technology, and medicine; the views and practices of Christian missionaries as well as the political practices of the modern state impacted almost everyone as well. Most important, the pattern of reform and synthesis that has kept this religion so flexible has continued, launching neo-Hindu teachers not only in South Asia but worldwide. Classical and reformed types of Hinduism, as well as political movements emphasizing religious identity, have proven extremely successful. We turn now to this time of immense change and innovation.

### Hinduism Under British Colonialism

The first Europeans known to have settled in South Asia were Roman Catholic missionaries, initially the Dominicans in the Portuguese colony of Goa by 1510 and, after 1540, the Jesuits, led by Francis Xavier. Early merchants in Mughal times also arrived by sea to trade for spices, silks, indigo, and cotton goods. Although they had competitors among early Dutch, Portuguese, and French traders, the British under the East India Company eventually were the most successful at establishing themselves permanently. As the Mughal Empire slowly disintegrated over its last fifty years and the region's "Hindu states" asserted their independence, civil disorder increased, causing trade and tax revenues to decline. In this unstable atmosphere, the British strengthened their trade missions with armed fortresses, and by 1730, military detachments

were integral to the British mercantile presence. From these centers, the British were drawn into conflicts; when they defeated local rulers in battle, they made alliances and extended their command and control. South Asia soon became a patchwork of British territory and "princely states" that submitted to the British but were still ruled in their internal affairs either by Hindu or Sikh kings or by Muslim sultans.

Modern scholarship on India and Hinduism originated in this context of Europeans seeking to learn about native peoples in order to tighten imperial control. British officials believed that it was their duty as white Europeans to spread "enlightened" civilization to the peoples of South Asia, who were typically portrayed as idolators and addicted to superstition. This message was, in turn, repeated back in Europe to justify the expanding colonial enterprise that had begun with merchants.

British schools were established in South Asia to train young Indians to serve in the colonial bureaucracy. This new class of Indians made first contact with modern ideas from Europe, especially in political thought, the natural sciences, and Christianity. This process unfolded in the colonial urban centers, beginning with Kolkata (previously Calcutta). Knowing the English language and culture became the necessary path for any ambitious Indian subject living under British rule.

By 1813, missionaries had arrived from every major Christian denomination. Many challenged Hinduism on every front, from theology and ritual practices to morality and caste norms. Some Christian ministers suggested that the British triumph in India represented God's judging Hinduism to be an idolatrous and demoniac

British Viceroy Lord Curzon (1859–1925) with a ruler of a princely state. British rule produced both crises and new opportunities for Hindu elites.

heresy. Many South Asians came to regard the missionaries as in league with the colonialists, resenting the racism of officials as well as their crude depictions of Hindus and Indian culture.

In 1857, widespread civil disturbances swept across British-held territories. During this period, called "the mutiny" by the British and regarded by many Indians as "the first war of independence," Indian troops and peasants gave vent to resentments over colonial law and administrative insensitivities, executing some British officers and murdering their families. Colonial troops and loyal mercenaries eventually put down the rebellion, and brutal reprisals were taken against Indian citizens. When order had been restored, the British parliament in 1858 dissolved the East India Company, which had held the royal charter for trade with Asia, and declared the Queen's direct rule. India became "the jewel in the crown" of the British Empire for the next ninety years.

## Challenges and Responses to Colonialism

The early modern era thus presented individual Hindus and Hindu institutions with challenges that were shared by other colonized peoples across the globe. These challenges appeared simultaneously in several forms: the scientific worldview of the European Enlightenment, humanistic critiques of religion, racial theories of European superiority, and the triumphalist Gospel teachings of outspoken Christian missionaries.

Most Christian missionaries from Britain were Protestant. Some boldly challenged Hinduism at temples, denouncing images and practices as "idolatry." Most more quietly established churches, schools, and hospitals. As a result, the ideas of nineteenth-century Protestantism had a distinct impact on many Hindus, who sought to reform their own traditions. Protestant emphases that were significant among Hindu reformers included the use of historical and scientific methods in the search for core scriptures and doctrines, as well as criticism of ritual that was not consistent with these doctrines. Other Protestant perspectives were distrust of traditional priests as purveyors of superstition and a focus on spiritual individualism, whereby each person is responsible for his or her own spiritual destiny. Hindu reformers were further influenced by the Protestant linking of social uplift initiatives with religious reforms and the prestige of monotheism. In colonial India, too, new forms of "Protestant Hinduism" mobilized the colonized to protest against British imperialism.

Although most South Asians did not convert to Islam or Christianity, many regions in which Hindus lived were ruled by non-Hindus (Muslims and their European successors). This state of affairs was distressing. Further, the economic dislocations due to imperialism in many instances undermined the traditional channels of financial support for Hindu scholars, activists, and temples.

The colonial government's political practice was to use religious identity as the basis for official dealings with "native constituencies." Thus, "Muslim," "Hindu,"

Considered the "first war of independence" by Indian nationalists, the uprising in 1857 was provoked by alleged disrespect of Muslim and Hindu troops under British command.

and "Sikh" communities were treated as politically defined identities. As a result, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs competed against one another for favorable treatment at the hands of the British government. Communal divides opened where none had existed. (Since the independence of India in 1947, tensions between these groups defined by religion have increased, sometimes tragically.)

The nineteenth century saw a variety of Hindu responses to colonialism. The early influential leaders were mainly brahmins, the traditional priestly caste that had long emphasized literacy and education. Among this elite group, especially those in areas of most intense contact with the British (Mumbai and Kolkata), the initial reaction to the Raj, as the British colonial government was called, shifted from indifference to more engaged positions: either hostility or curiosity. We turn now to examine prominent examples among these Hindu responses.

### *The First Reformist Generation: Rammohan Roy, Brahmo Samaj, and the Tattvabodhini Sabha*

The success of the colonial powers raised an uncomfortable question: How could the world-preserving great deities have allowed non-Hindus to overshadow Hindus and to defame Hindu society? Some Hindus gave an answer similar to that of other faiths struggling under colonialism: Revelation had not failed, but the community had lost true belief and practice. Therefore, the community needed to be reformed.

**Rammohan Roy:** pioneering religious figure who called for the reform of Hindu beliefs and practices

The first to articulate this position for Hinduism was **Rammohan Roy** (1772–1833), who is regarded by many as "the father of modern India." Roy called

Christian missionaries possessed overwhelming confidence in their work but converted relatively few. Muslim and Hindu leaders of South Asia often criticized missionary hypocrisy, though some adopted reforms due to their influence. This cartoon captures local resentment of missionary practices and their calls to "destroy your gods, burn your books, be converted..."

for the reform of certain Hindu beliefs and practices prevalent across India, including superstition, caste discrimination, and the practice of widow immolation (*sati*). He argued for universal education in English so that Indians could study modern math, science, and medicine. Roy was equally outspoken in defending Hinduism against missionary attacks, drawing on his study of the Bible and rational analysis to critique Christianity's own dogmas.

In 1828, Roy founded Brahmo Sabha, an organization to further his reformist views. In 1841, the name was changed to the Brahmo Samaj, whose official English title—"Fellowship of Believers in the One True God"—expressed its goal of uniting Hindus of all castes to proclaim a reformist, monotheistic ideology. The Brahmo Samaj's importance lies in its strong influence on subsequent generations of Hindu reformers and revivalists; their writings also reached America and Europe and were among the first to describe Hinduism to the West.

**Tattvabodhini Sabha:** colonial Hindu sect in Kolkata that promoted adaptation to India's new economic and political realities

The **Tattvabodhini Sabha** ("Truth-Propagating Society") was an influential group in Kolkata associated with Roy's teachings. Aimed at exploring and propagating the teachings of Vedantic Hinduism in light of enlightenment rationality, the group was funded by leading members of the rising middle class that was prospering under British rule. Its meetings attracted leading Hindu teachers and philosophers, and their addresses were published in vernacular languages and circulated widely among the colonial-era native class: entrepreneurs, landed gentry, school teachers, journalists, and a mixture of high castes and newly rich businessmen.

The Tattvabodhini Sabha's revivalism was influenced by their commitment to promote Hinduism's adaptation to India's new economic and political realities. Their publications urged "modern Hindus" to work hard, live honestly, save rationally, and promote altruism, advocating as well Vedanta's message of the individual controlling personal desires. Along with Roy, they advocated reformed Hinduism being led by "godly householders," not the premodern elite of world-renouncing ascetics. And instead of seeking to extirpate all human desire, Hindus should accept desire's power but guide it "according to dharma" (here, "justice") and realize society's overall betterment. Like the ethos underlying the successful Protestant businessmen then leading the global spread of Western capitalism, this influential Hindu elite articulated a congruent view of human mission, though they built this on a very different metaphysical foundation.

### *More Strident and Sectarian: Dayananda and the Arya Samaj*

Similar in many respects to the Brahmo Samaj but centered in Bombay and Lahore, the **Arya Samaj** was founded in 1875 by the brahmin teacher Swami Dayananda (1824–1883). Dayananda held the fundamentalist view that only the four Vedas not only were valid sources for true Hinduism but in fact were "infallible," containing all knowledge, even the root ideas of modern science. India, he famously proclaimed, "needed nothing from the West." For him, as for Roy, the essential Hindu theological idea was monotheism. Accordingly, he rejected post-Vedic scripture and saw later polytheism as the reason for Hinduism's decline. Dayananda tirelessly denounced practices such as child marriage, untouchability, and the subjugation of women, and he composed his own simplified list of ethical norms and a description of properly reformed Vedic rituals. He also denounced Sikhism.

**Arya Samaj:** religious organization that redefined and defended reformed Hindu traditions

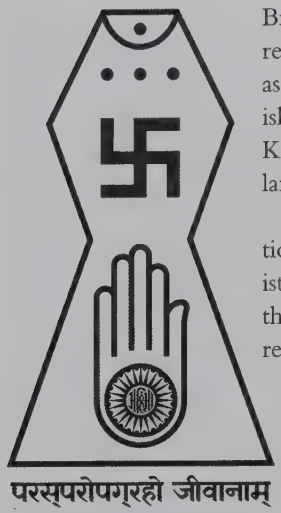
Numerous Dayananda Anglo-Vedic colleges and high schools continue the Arya Samaj revivalist tradition to the present day. Many of the current BJP members and leaders have been influenced by the Arya Samaj.

### *Jain Reformism*

Like other communities, Jains in the last two centuries have revitalized their traditions and spread them globally through their communities and businesses. Jains today have emphasized how their doctrines are compatible with science; they have also focused on the virtues of vegetarianism and animal protection. Movements focusing on environmental health have been led by Jains, and in recent decades, some teachers have accepted Westerners into the Jain monastic community, especially in England and the United States. In 1975, to celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of the saint Mahavira, a new symbol (the *pratika*) was devised to represent the tradition. In 1971, the first Jain center in the United States was opened in New York.

### *Sikh Reform and Resurgence*

Through their resistance to the Mughals, the Sikhs eventually carved out their own kingdom in western India that lasted from 1799 until 1849, when it was absorbed into




The pratīka: symbol of the Jaina faith, officially adopted during the 2,500th anniversary of Mahavira's nirvana (1975). The palm of the hand bears the word *ahimsa*; the svastika topped by three dots and the crescent represent the four destinies, the threefold path, and the abode of the liberated souls, respectively; the slogan below the figure "*loka-akasa*" calls for the mutual assistance of all beings.

British India. After this, Sikh men were recruited into the colonial army, becoming renowned for their disciplined character and martial abilities. Sikhs also found success as civil servants, educators, and businessmen. Soon, Sikhs were serving across the British Empire, and on retirement, many settled outside India, from Singapore and Hong Kong to England. These migrants brought their faith with them, making Sikhism a large global faith today.

Sikhs also responded to the religious challenges posed by South Asia's colonial situation and the aggressive Christian missionaries who appeared in the Punjab. One reformist group, known as the Nirakaris, emphasized ascetic values and fervent devotion to the Formless One (*nirankar*). Its founder, Baba Dayal (1783–1855), like some Hindu reformers, wanted to purify the faith of superstitions and any Hindu practices. Another Sikh reformist organization, the larger Singh Sabha (Lion Society), was formed in 1879 to advocate traditional values and implement social and educational programs to defend the faith. Centered in Amritsar, the Singh Sabha sponsored publications that encouraged religious pride among Sikh communities across India and abroad.

By 1920, calls for independence were rising across South Asia. Sikhs joined the movement due to the abuses of the British government in two areas: a colonial policy that placed Hindu caretakers in control of Sikh gurudwaras, and the administrative decision to place control of the Golden Temple in the hands of a British Deputy Commissioner. A new Sikh political action group, the Akali Dal, was formed to address these problems. The Gurudwara Act of 1925 was successful in returning to a Sikh committee the sole authority to manage the historic gurudwaras in the united Punjab, including the Golden Temple. The Akali Dal then joined Muslim and Hindu groups seeking the end of British rule, and they continue to pursue Sikh interests in postcolonial India.

### *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: The First Global Hindu Mission*

A brahmin like Roy and Dayananda but with a much more humble educational background, Ramakrishna (1834–1886) was a charismatic guru who attracted reform-minded Hindus. His spiritual experiences included long periods of trance in which he reported being possessed in turn by Kali, Sita, Rama, Krishna, Muhammad, and Jesus. Ramakrishna's teaching emphasized that the entire universe is permeated by the paramount divine spirit, a reality that is called different names by the world's different people but whose essence is one. In articulating this view, Ramakrishna was updating to a global scale the interfaith teaching of the classical Hindu school we have already discussed, that of Vedantic Hinduism.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Ramakrishna's foremost disciple, became a guru in his own right and presented this theology in a systematic manner. The first great missionary representative of Hinduism on the global stage, Vivekananda became very popular through lectures on Hinduism across America and Europe. Most Westerners' first acquaintance with Hinduism is largely a product of the teachings of Vivekananda and his later followers.

Vivekananda organized the **Ramakrishna Mission**, and its monastic institutions spread across India. The mission advocated reformist traditions and embraced a global ecumenical awareness. Its highly organized order of monks cultivated inner spiritual development through yoga, taught "the Gospel of Ramakrishna," and established educational institutions, hospitals, and hospices open to all. The Ramakrishna Mission became the first great global Hindu organization with a vision of ecumenical Hinduism as the savior of the world, not merely of India. The mission's disciples in the West now support its global reach. By 2020, it had published several hundred books and built retreat centers, libraries, and sanctuaries in major cities in seventeen countries.

"Calling God Mother is a higher idea than calling Him Father, to call him Friend is still higher, but the highest is to regard Him as the Beloved. The highest point of all is to see no difference between lover and beloved."

—Vivekananda

SOURCE: Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed., Vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 73.

## The Work of Gandhi: Hindu Elements in Indian Nationalism

By the turn of the twentieth century, Britain's command over the subcontinent included a vast modern infrastructure (roads, railroads, telegraph) that supported increasing trade. The presence of Christian missions and the colonial government's bureaucracy had also expanded. Indian leaders and organizations seeking to strengthen and reform Hinduism were also multiplying through this period, and religious reformism and political activism frequently converged.

The growing independence movement drew on religious identity and pride. An important player in the independence movement was the Indian National Congress, founded in 1880 in Bombay. Although dominated by brahmins and a few Muslims, who were mostly urban, English-educated lawyers, the Congress sought to speak for

Different people call on [God] by different names: some as Allah, some as God, others as Krishna, Shiva, and Brahman. It is like the water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it "*jal*," others at another place and call it "*pani*," and still others at a third place and call it "water." The Hindus call it "*jal*," the Christians "water," and the Muslims "*pani*." But it is one and the same thing.

—Parable by Ramakrishna

**Ramakrishna Mission:** influential Hindu missionary and reform organization founded by Swami Vivekananda

Mohandas K. Gandhi, a great political leader who merged European ideas with reformist Hindu teachings to lead India to independence.

all Indians. While it proclaimed loyalty to the Raj, the Congress agitated nonviolently for greater economic development and the growth of self-rule. Thus, it gained acceptance as the party to communicate Indian needs to the colonial government.

The spiritual background motivating many of the Congress leaders was that of the reformists who sought to regenerate Indian culture (both Hindu and Islamic). Indeed, many were convinced that India had a spiritual message for the future of humanity. Such a sentiment was heightened by the two world wars, whose devastation suggested that neither science, European political systems, nor Christianity was to be triumphant in global history.

**Mohandas K. Gandhi:** iconic leader who inspired mass support and led India to independence by combining religious and political reforms

**Mohandas K. Gandhi** (1869–1948) became the most significant leader to guide South Asia to independence. Gandhi himself embodies the changes affecting South Asia as the era of globalism under colonialism was brought to an end. As a reformist Hindu who merged European and Indian cultures, Gandhi became one of the greatest world figures of the twentieth century.

On the national stage, Gandhi linked the Congress elite with the masses. Although some disagreed with his stands, he was a nationally venerated guru, an activist who wrote and acted creatively to reinterpret Hinduism in an ethical, this-worldly manner. Gandhi went on hunger strikes to move British officials (or, at times, other Indian leaders) to reconsider their positions. The honorific *Mahatma* applied to his name, meaning "great-souled [one]," expresses the profound spiritual respect he garnered in his lifetime.

Carrying on the work of earlier reformers, Gandhi decried high-caste discrimination toward others, and he especially highlighted the brutal treatment of the lowest, "untouchable" caste as a blight on Hinduism. He also extended the Hindu and Jain notion of ***ahimsa*** (nonviolence) to describe an entire way of life, what he called ***satyagraha***, guided by this ideal. Through following ahimsa in all spheres, Gandhi argued, the modern Hindu could find the truth in humble daily work. It was a principle that could transform the individual and society, imbuing each with a spiritual center.

**ahimsa:** nonviolence

**satyagraha:** "grasping the truth"; Gandhi's central principle of disciplined nonviolence that reflects ethical truth

Gandhi's life work was crowned in 1947, when India finally gained its independence. However, celebration of this long-anticipated moment was shattered by the violence that accompanied it. The British had allowed no time for the orderly implementation of their decision to divide South Asia in two: India, a new secular nation, and the Muslim state of Pakistan. A civil war broke out in which an estimated 4 million people perished. Nearing the age of eighty, Gandhi traveled to many of these areas in an attempt to quell the chaos, but largely in vain. He was murdered in 1948 by a member of a fundamentalist Hindu group that had opposed partition and accused Gandhi of "concessions" to Muslims and the lowest castes.

India in many respects has abandoned Gandhi's concept of spiritually centered, small-scale development. Only in civil law has India continued to embrace Gandhi's vision, in its attempts to eradicate caste discrimination. Challenged by Hindu nationalists for two decades, the modern state of India has had its fundamental identity as a secular—not Hindu—nation badly shaken. Nothing symbolizes this more dramatically that the widespread vandalizing of Gandhi memorials in recent years.

## Gandhi

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born in a merchant family in the western region of Gujarat. As a young man, he traveled to London to study law. While there, he encountered for the first time the classical Hindu texts—all in English translations. He was introduced to them not by an Indian guru but through meetings at the Theosophical Society, a group of European mystics interested in the secret doctrines they felt were at the root of all world religions.

After becoming a lawyer, Gandhi settled in South Africa, then a British colony with a large Indian minority. He was soon drawn into political activism in opposition to the racist and discriminatory imperial practices directed toward South Asians as "coloreds." From experiences with protests and community organization, Gandhi developed his principle of *satyagraha*. This concept has roots in the Hindu and Jain doctrine of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and in Christianity's injunctions to love one's enemy. Gandhi's work in South Africa among Indian immigrants drew the attention of Congress leaders in India, who urged him to return. He did so in 1915.

Although Gandhi always retained respect for British law and the moral ideals articulated in Western religions, back in India he abandoned Western dress for the humble loincloth of the Indian peasant. Gandhi's greatness as a political leader was likewise built on his connection with the Indian masses, a relationship that developed through his tours of the countryside, his involvement with peasant protests, his self-imposed poverty, and an effective organization (including a daily newspaper).

# Hinduism and Postmodern Trends in a Postcolonial World

In India today, one can witness religious practices from the most ancient period, practice "laughing yoga" with young professionals in an urban park before going to work, or attend a demonstration organized by a Hindu fundamentalist group that wants to make their version of "Hinduism" the state religion. Because there is no single version of "Hinduism" on which to center our treatment of contemporary change, we now focus on representative case studies that illustrate patterns of unity in the diversity of postmodern Hinduism.

## The Persistence of Traditional Religious Understandings

Despite the progress of modernization, there has been a remarkable persistence of traditional beliefs and practices in postcolonial India. Since the great pluralism in what is "Hinduism" goes back over 2,000 years, we can only broadly trace the typical understandings that are common among Hindus today.

### *The Presence of the Divine*

Whatever specific doctrines or practices an individual Hindu follows, life entails more than satisfying the needs dictated by survival. A divine reality enfolds human reality, interpenetrating the material world and human experience. This occurs primarily through the soul (atman), which animates an embryo in the womb and energizes human life.

Hindu society is unique in its veneration of the sacred in the daily rhythms of life. Rituals honor the rising and setting sun; offerings are made at humble temples erected near stones or trees; inhabitants revere rivers and mountains as well as animals such as elephants, snakes, monkeys, and (of course) cows. Devotees worship at shrines for the divine protectors of houses, families, artisans, and castes, and farmers worship guardian deities of their fields. In some villages, a spirit medium cures those possessed by ghosts or demons through offerings and trance. And astrologers advise on how the distant deities who appear in the night sky can best be propitiated. Finally, at every key moment in a person's life—birth, coming of age, marriage, and death—the local brahmin is called on to perform rituals.

In urban areas where some of the older traditions are less prominent, brahmins can still be found performing such rites and also adapting Hindu practices to changing times. For example, since 2004, a regular service offered to all customers of Maruti Udyog cars, the most popular automotive brand in modern India, is to have a brahmin priest perform a puja for the vehicle's good fortune; Maruti Udyog showrooms also feature a line of automotive accessories that include dashboard statues of the Hindu gods.

This excursion into Hinduism as lived tradition today makes clear the immanence of spirit is respected and the gods live next door. It is the human task to find harmony with them and, eventually, to seek liberation from rebirth by finding the spirit in whatever guise one is most suited to discover. Even in modern cities and among individuals who are highly educated, the wish to connect with and worship the divine remains strong today.

### *Hindu Inclusivity Accommodates Wide-Ranging Sectarianism*

Another distinctive characteristic of Hinduism today is the broad range of ideas about the sacred and the tendency for individuals to accept alternative or even opposing views. The coexistence of so many competing theologies and religious practices and even the toleration of nonbelievers have been based on two notions. First is the belief that a human understanding of the highest truth, whatever that is held to be, is never complete or perfect. Second is the expectation that individuals, as they learn and practice more deeply, will see reality more clearly. From these twin perspectives, persons thought to hold false views are simply located on a lower rank in an hierarchy, not rejected. A wrongheaded person may be ignorant, immature, or incomplete, but not evil.

Muslim–Hindu relations continue to be important and contentious in modern India. Communal enmity on religious lines was rare after Islam began to win converts among indigenous groups in South Asia (900 CE). Religious conflict is not an eternal, inevitable standpoint in South Asia (or elsewhere); in the past, as today, it has been the product of specific historical contexts, shaped by human actions and political

policies. The inclusive religious attitude characteristic of South Asia has encouraged new spiritual searches and the appearance of new religious sects that combine beliefs and practices from various traditions, including astrology, Buddhism, and "secular" traditions such as psychology. The first thousand years of Islam and Muslims in South Asia followed this tolerant pattern.

Although Hindu groups accept others and acknowledge their value, many Hindus are indeed sectarian in their religious orientation. While the view "all the gods are one" is widely expressed, not everyone shares it. Adherence to the ecumenical strategy of inclusivity, of accepting the legitimacy of competing religious standpoints, does not oblige one to abandon the truth claims of one's own sect. Thus, Hindu worldviews have held their primacy throughout modern times and into the postcolonial era; it has mainly been in reforming and modernizing their social institutions that Hindus have adopted non-Hindu ideas.

## Contemporary Hindu Practices

What provides Hinduism with a measure of unity is not a single belief system. Rather, it is a common set of ritual actions that most individuals will observe to connect with the divine, however they conceive it. There are also individuals (ritualists, astrologers,

A Hindu priest in Nepal offers *tika* powder, an essential part of the daily worship service for every god. The powder will later be used by the Brahmin priests to mark the foreheads of devotees.

gurus) with whom most Hindus can consult for instructions on which to base their actions and deepen their beliefs. Beginning several thousand years ago, and continuing today, these relationships have remained integral to Hindu life.

### *The Guru–Disciple Relationship*

Since the time of the Upanishads, one central Hindu tradition has been the relationship connecting gurus and disciples. Just as Hindus perceive the divine in the world around them, they find spirit alive in its realization by those who reach moksha, achieve spiritual powers, and share their experiences for the benefit of humanity. Charismatic saintly gurus still hold a central place in both traditional and reformist Hinduism.

We have noted the lasting forms of organized Hinduism that appeared in the postclassical era. Then, as now, numerous spiritual teachers emerged in the traditional manner of undergoing long periods of training with independent gurus and then attracting their own disciples. Guru residences called ***ashrams*** sustain the community that performs rituals, meditates, and learns together under the guru's direction. Many Hindu guru-centered institutions last only as long as the charismatic teacher lives, or only through his first generation of designated successors. Yet others continue, and in these cases, we see the central Hindu notion of lineage—that is, the belief that today's teachers are connected to earlier gurus, back to the first enlightened sage in the line.

**ashram:** center of religious practice following a guru

The circle of disciples must master the guru's instructions on the key spiritual practices (meditation, worship, etc.), most often memorizing them through intensive repetition. They may also collect their guru's teachings, sometimes only in memory and sometimes through writing or even video. Eventually, one or more disciples are also designated as gurus by the elderly teacher, and so lineage continues. Accepting a personal guru entails assuming a new identity, which is symbolized in the widespread practice of receiving a new name. The true guru is the one who can open access to spiritual awakening, but the disciple can expect the guru's full grace and loving guidance only through the complete acceptance of his master's words and an abandonment of ego.

### *Living with Karma: Rituals, Astrology, and Rebirth*

The classical doctrines associated with karma, reincarnation, and liberation are the center of Hindu (and Buddhist) belief, regardless of the school one follows or one's focus on a particular chosen deity. Karma is thus the most important spiritual force in the universe, determining one's place in the cosmos. Because what one does in a particular incarnation influences future destiny, Hindu belief does not posit a fatalistic worldview. Non-karmic causes (natural forces, biological reactions, chance) also shape human life, so Hindus can say, like many Americans, "It was meant to be" as well as "Things just happen." Only enlightened saints are capable of knowing their karmic past and future; everyone else remains uncertain. For this reason, the practice of doing ritual is a sensible approach to living with karma, adding to one's accumulation; so is consultation with astrologers, whose calculations can include the pattern of future karmic retribution.

Along with karma, a person's destiny can be shaped by group actions. Husbands and wives worship together and act together in many ways. Marriage ritual ties couples for

life and can include a vow to be reborn together in future incarnations (a popular motif in South Asian folklore). Entire families are thought to be shaped by the actions of elders.

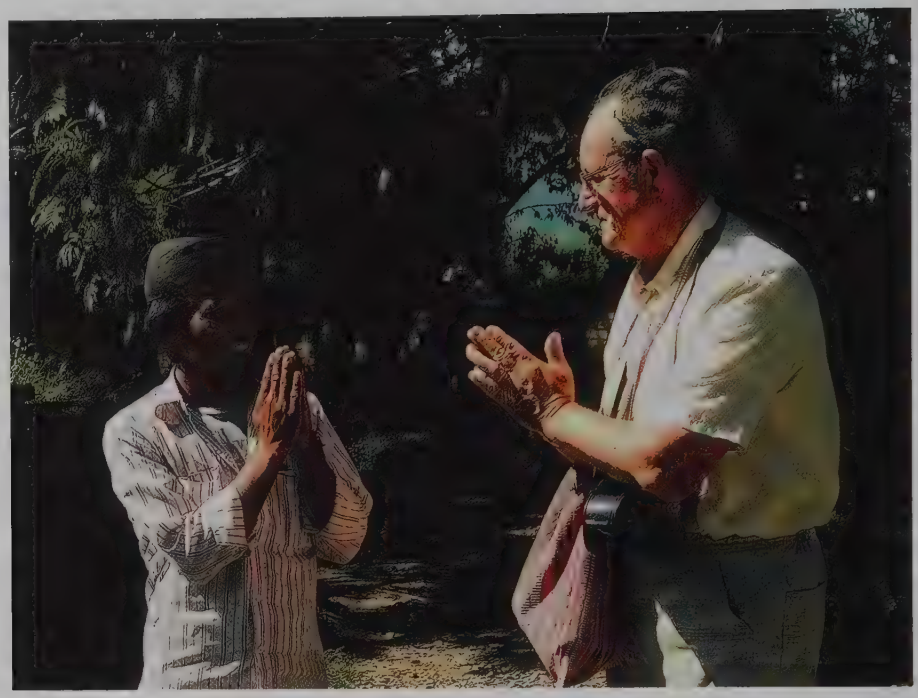
Hindus today may explain their individual and collective destiny in terms of karma causality, but understandings about the workings of next-life destiny are anything but certain. For example, some individuals do indeed see everything in life as fated from earlier lifetimes. But most Hindus believe that their destiny today and in future lifetimes is also determined in significant part by their current moral actions and the rituals they do. The puranas and guru parables often state that being human, and being Hindu, are rare incarnations in samsara and should not be wasted. People may be reborn as other beings inhabiting this world, into purgatories that receive evil human beings, or into heavenly realms created by each great deity as dwelling places reserved for good and devout devotees. Indeed, many Hindus today regard rebirth in heaven, not union with Brahman, as their highest destiny.

### *Gestures of Respect for the Divine*

Respectful gestures and puja are the means by which many Hindus relate to the divine. Stylized greetings, prostrations, and circumambulation (walking around an icon or temple) are among the best-known ritual gestures.

Hindus greet each other by raising the joined palms to shoulder level and repeating "*Namaskara*"/"*Namaste*" ("salutation"/"greetings"), sometimes bowing. Some

A Hindu astrologer. Astrology provides suggestions about when to act in the world, in harmony with the planetary gods and one's own karma.



Namaskara or namaste, the gesture of respectful greeting directed to the gods and humans.

gurus teach that saluting other humans in this way is a theological statement: "I center my physical self in the atman located in my heart and salute your same holy center."

The core gesture of namaskara can be multiplied into any number of prostrations, either with the knees touching the ground or fully prone. This gesture, too, is one humans may do to other humans by, for example, grasping the feet of an honored guru, priest, mother-in-law (for a daughter-in-law), husband (for a wife), parents (for children), or other elder in the family.

Another Hindu perception of the body involves the differentiation between its two sides: The right side is the pure side, so Hindus eat with the right hand. The left hand is used to wash after calls of nature and is regarded as impure. As an extension of this, the circumambulation of an icon or temple should be performed in a clockwise manner, keeping one's pure right side closest to the sacred object.

## *Puja*

**puja:** ritual offering and other acts of homage to a deity

The practice of **puja** is also built on the assumption that humanity must maintain an intimate connection with the divine marked by respectful hierarchy and service. For humans, the great deities (e.g., Shiva, Durga, and Vishnu) are superiors. Puja involves all the expressions by which an inferior can welcome, show respect for, and entertain a distinguished guest. Ideally, all ritual acts express a faithful bhakta's submissive and adoring service to the divine.

To mark and purify any space and make it suitable for puja, cow dung mixed with clay is a necessary ground coating; offerings of cow's milk or butter are often made. The cow is sacred to Hindus. One ancient text suggests that all the divinities exist in the cow, and another sees the cow as an incarnation of the goddess Devi.

In doing puja, the bhakta seeks to please the deity as if the divine personage possessed five senses, and the offerings of puja can be classified accordingly. Incense, for example, pleases the sense of smell. Flowers please the senses of sight and smell. Foods gratify the taste. Mantras and music please the hearing, and cloth pleases the deity's sense of touch.

The inseparability of otherworldly and mundane blessings is seen in the full process involved in making a puja offering and then receiving back the remains, ***prasad***. These substances carry a subtle infusion of divine blessing, turning all prasad into "medicine." Returned food can be eaten, flowers worn in the hair, incense smoke wafted around the body, and holy water sipped. Colored powders that decorate an icon are carefully collected, mixed with water, and used to mark the forehead with a *tilak*, a spot in the center of the forehead above the eyes. Families often share from the same plate on which the prasad returned from the common family puja.

**prasad:** remains of any substance used in a puja; believed to have healing properties

Hindu puja. Ritual is the means of expressing individual devotion and soliciting divine grace.

Hindus need never worship in public and may make all puja offerings to icons in a home shrine. In temples with priestly attendants, devotees usually place on the puja tray coins or uncooked rice to be donated to the priests. It is through the medium of puja that Hindu householders contribute to the subsistence of their priests and temples. Hindu temples can be humble thatched buildings sheltering crude stones with no resident priests or magnificent palaces built to house jeweled images attended by hosts of priests and other temple servants. Great temples may be surrounded by monasteries, music pavilions, pilgrim hostels, and sacred ponds; these are the preeminent centers of Hindu culture.

Through this adherence to orthopraxy (right practice), we can see how ritual traditions define the individual Hindu's passage through the circle of life, from birth to death. The rituals generate good karma, petition the gods for protection, and unify kin and castes. We now survey the cycle of major festivals that mark the passage of the typical Hindu's day, month, and year. Here again, the unity of Hinduism is seen in the rituals that unite individuals, families, and communities to revere and petition the succession of deities.

## RITUALS AND RITES: Hindu Life-Cycle Rituals

The *Dharmashastras* list over forty life-cycle rituals, and families with the resources at the top of the caste hierarchy still observe them. We summarize the most popular contemporary practices briefly here, using the terms and culture of North India as representative.

### Birth Rituals

Pregnant women are given empowered charms to protect the fetus and are made to stay within the family, isolated from demons and from sources of pollution. Despite the spilling of the mother's blood and bodily fluids, birth is a time of "happy pollution," and for the period of the mother's recovery, the family abstains from puja and does not eat with outsiders.

### Early Childhood Rituals

The ritual called *namkaran* gives an infant its formal name. Naming children after the deities is a common practice, and this can be done according to a parent's chosen deity, for the day on which the child is born, or simply for auspiciousness. The carefully noted birth time must be used to construct a horoscope, which will be kept for lifelong consultation. Before the first birthday, the final early childhood rite of first rice feeding introduces the baby to solid food.

### Coming of Age

Boys and girls are led on different ritual paths emphasizing male dominance and female fertility. The rites marking adulthood for both sexes establish expectations and responsibilities of full Hindu personhood. Since the *Dharmashastras* forbid teaching Vedic verses to women, adult females are not assigned brahmanical rites but participate in their husbands' rituals.

Girls are initiated as women when they have their first menstruation. During this time, elder females in the family tell stories of the deities and instruct the girls on aspects of adult religious practice and the duties of Hindu women.

Boys of the top three castes are ceremonially given a sacred thread, after which they receive the first teachings from the family guru, including the rituals associated with the wearing of a multistranded thread (*janai*) over the left shoulder and right hip. (In modern times, this "wearing the thread" is maintained most consistently among brahmin families only.) Boys are also given their first mantra to memorize, the Rig Vedic Gayatri

## Hindu and Sikh Festival Practice

Many Hindus today carry a small pocket almanac that organizes the Western, lunar, and solar succession of days. Why are these so popular? Since the year is punctuated by great and small festivals, some lasting only a day but others stretching over ten days, Hindus must harmonize personal, family, and business affairs with the succession of religious celebrations.

Part of the reason for this elaborate festival agenda is that across South Asia, it is customary for each important deity to have a special day and procession that is the occasion for extraordinary acts of devotion. At these times, the god or goddess

(3.62.10), to be repeated daily at the rising and setting of the sun:

> We meditate on that excellent light of the divine sun
> May he illumine our minds.

In adult initiation, boys become "twice-born" through this second birth into the knowledge of the Veda and Vedic ritual.

### Householder

Marriage is usually arranged by the couple's families, though many young people today can veto a choice proposed for them. The relatives consult an astrologer to ensure that their characters and karmas are compatible.

Upon marriage, a Hindu woman leaves her home, often with a dowry, to live with her mother-in-law, shifting forever her ritual center to the husband's family line. This pattern is less common today in the urban middle classes as well as among the rural population that is drawn to migrate to cities in search of jobs and education.

### Death

Death produces a state of pollution that for immediate kin endures for an entire year. When someone dies, the family wishes to perform all the rites to ensure that the soul will go to its best possible rebirth. However, the death of a loved one also produces worry that the soul might be reincarnated as a dangerous or wandering ghost. This concern has given rise to the custom of cremating a corpse as soon as possible after death and before sundown. Carrying the body to the cremation site, the *ghat*, is men's work, with the eldest son lighting the pyre for the father and the youngest son doing so for the mother. The women, who stay at home during the cremation, must remove their ornaments and sweep the house, beginning to repurify the house polluted by death. The men who cremate must collect the burned remains so that the family can immerse them in a holy river.

### After-Death Rites

Before the family may reestablish purity in their homes and resume social life, they must perform the first rites of feeding the departed soul, who is thought to wander for up to one year. Here, the most ancient of Hindu ritual traditions is preserved in the performance of Vedic rites: The mourners offer a puja of ritual rice ball offerings to feed the soul and build up its strength to continue on its afterlife journey. Rites for parents, and especially fathers, are done yearly on the death anniversary.

is thought to be more accessible to devotees and more inclined to extend grace to those who demonstrate their faith. During the Hindu festivals, legends and myths are retold by religious scholars or enacted through live cultural performances. In many of the festivals, special food offerings, drinks, and decorations are made that appear at no other time. Other festivals are reserved for fasting, ascetic acts, or other penances.

The greatest festivals are immense, multi-day spectacles, and arranging for the myriad cultural performances and sideshows requires the participation of thousands. Arrays of electric lights, clouds of incense, and blaring loudspeakers overload the devotees' senses. The gatherings can create a marvelous sense of community among bhaktas, drawing pilgrims from afar to witness and to seek blessings.

Hindus associated with large temples take out the images of the great gods yearly. The most dramatic of these outings is a large chariot that is pulled by devotees (here in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India) to earn merit.

## RITUALS AND RITES: Major Festivals

### Diwali

Across the north of India, the year begins with Diwali, the festival around the autumnal equinox that focuses on Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. On the main day, families wear new clothes, sweep their houses clean, arrange a special altar with puja laid out for the goddess, and set up lights to guide her. On a subsequent day, brothers and sisters honor their kin ties, and individuals may do other special pujas to strengthen their health for the year ahead. Middle-class families now send "Diwali cards," akin to Christmas cards.

### Sri Panchami

The festival of Sri Panchami is dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning and the fine arts. Students, scholars, and artists will flock to her temples. Some temples set up a whitewashed wall on which young children are to write their first letters, for traditional Hindu parents wait until this day to begin teaching their children to read and write.

### Shiva Ratri

Shiva Ratri ("Shiva's Night") is the end-of-winter festival, one of two festivals each year dedicated to Shiva. This festival emphasizes fasting and offerings to Shiva's phallic icon, the *linga*. In some localities, the festival connects with the god's control of the myriad ghosts and goblins that occupy the lower portions of the Hindu pantheon. It is also the time for ascetics to make offerings at Shiva's temples, which fill with thousands of sadhus and yogins who meditate, instruct devotees, receive donations, and demonstrate their powers.

### Holi

Hinduism's "feast of love," or Holi, is the year's primary festival honoring Krishna in his guise as the playful trickster god. For the primary three or so days, all of society is at play. Normal caste and gender rules are suspended, and established hierarchies and expectations are inverted. Women may sing lewdly in public or douse male passersby with buckets of water, and public officials such as policemen suffer usually playful pranks. In villages, an untouchable may be declared "headman" for the duration of the festival. On the last day, bonfires are lit to consume evil, commemorating Krishna's defeat of a female demon who sought his demise. Holi is now becoming an international commercial holiday, spread by Hindu immigrants and those who are eager to find a reason to throw a party.

Children enjoying Holi, the festival when humans join Krishna in living life as a divine sport.

*continued*

## RITUALS AND RITES: Major Festivals *continued*

### Tij

Tij is the festival for women, who can act in imitation of Parvati, one manifestation of Devi, who fasted, meditated, and underwent purification in the hopes of winning Shiva as her husband. For those already married, these actions are for the long life of one's spouse. During Tij, some women spend the night at a temple, where they sing devotional songs while fasting and listen to stories associated with Parvati and other exemplary women.

### Dashara

In many places, the largest yearly Hindu celebration, Dashara, usually falls just before the first rice harvest. It has become the occasion for marking two separate divine events. For Rama bhaktas, this festival celebrates both Rama's birth and his victory over the demon Ravana. Durga Puja similarly enfolds the community in the goddess Durga's "Nine Nights" of struggle against the demon Mahisha. The "Victory Tenth Day" commemorates Durga's slaying of Mahisha, and to imitate the goddess in her moment of triumph and to bathe her images in the blood offerings that she most loves, devotees perform animal sacrifices at her temples, beheading primarily male goats, fowl, and water buffalo.

## Hindu Pilgrimage Festivals

**darshan:** seeing the divine; making eye contact with a god, holy site, or guru

From earliest times, Hindus believed the mountains and rivers of the land bounded by the Himalayas and the oceans to be abodes of the deities and the places where sages have realized the highest truths. From then until now, devotees have gone on pilgrimages to see these sacred persons and places for ***darshan*** (viewing the divine). On their journeys today, Hindus do the rituals described for temples, make offerings and expressions of respect, and bring home treasured prasad.

The most dramatic among the Hindu sacred sites are located in the Himalayas, the world's highest mountain chain, where the very names of the snow-clad peaks reflect the perception of divine residence. According to one passage in the *Skanda Purana*, seeing any of the Himalayan peaks will transform one's karma: "As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so is the bad karma of mankind by the sight of Himalayas."

Rivers are also focal places for Hindu pilgrimage. The Ganges and all its tributaries that flow down from the Himalayan glaciers are associated with divinity. The Ganges is conceived as a goddess who descended to earth as a blessing to humans; as such, many bathing rites are done along its banks, where devotees hope to draw on her capacity to "wash away" bad karma. Ganges water is seen as the best source for purifying a ritual space, so pilgrims collect and store it for future ritual use. All rivers in South Asia are identified with the Ganges. A common legend known across the continent states that each river shares a subterranean connection with it. The points on the river best suited for human pilgrimage and ritualism are where tributary streams join the Ganges; these confluences are called ***tirthas***. The literal translation of the word

**tirtha:** a holy space defined by a river confluence

Pilgrims at the Amarnath Cave. Devotees worship the ice lingam of the great god Shiva found within this Himalayan hillside.

Temples attract local devotees and distant pilgrims, who also are drawn to the darshan of the Himalayas.

(ford, or river crossing) also indicates metaphorically that it is easier to cross the great river of samsara to reach heaven or moksha at a tirtha.

### *The Kumbha Mela*

The largest single religious gathering on earth in the early twenty-first century is not Muslims assembling in Mecca for the *hajj* but Hindus congregating at a holy tirtha for the Kumbha Mela. In 2013, at least 110 million Hindus gathered to bathe at Prayag ("place of sacrifice"), on the riverside near modern Allahabad, where the Ganges, Yamuna, and invisible Saraswati rivers meet. The pilgrims enter the water at the exact auspicious moment (as determined by astrologers) that is connected with a story in the puranas in which the gods battled the demons over possession of a pitcher (*kumbha*) containing an immortality-giving elixir. After a long struggle, the gods won and became immortal. During the course of the battle, however, four drops of the elixir fell to earth at four places, and they are the sites of the Kumbha Melas. This gathering draws hundreds of thousands of sadhus who are first to immerse themselves in the hyperdivinized river waters; soon, they are then joined by millions of householders on pilgrimage, who bathe, offer puja, and sip the ambrosial river water, seeking an infusion of grace.

Pilgrimage in Hinduism is not a requirement of the faith as in Islam, but the benefits are elaborately outlined in the later Hindu texts: healing, good karma, and personal transformation. Pilgrims can go alone on foot or, with increasing popularity, in highly organized groups traveling on airplanes and buses. The goal may be to perform a ritual, such as a mortuary rite for a kin member. The more typical goal, however, is to seek general benefit through darshan and puja.

Ritual bathers in Varanasi, also known as Kashi or Benares. Located on the western bank of the Ganges and with its riverside cremation sites called ghats dominating the urban settlement, Kashi is the sacred city where pilgrims congregate.

### Sikh Festivals

The commonalities and divergences between Hindus and Sikhs are visible in the Sikh festivals. These are known as *guru purb,* "guru remembrance" days for remembering the teachers. The birthdays of all ten gurus beginning with Nanak are observed, as are commemorations of the martyrdoms of great leaders. All of these holy days involve chanting of the Adi Granth; during most of them, the entire text is read in relay over the forty-eight hours prior to the festival day.

There are three main festivals that coincide with the great Hindu celebrations but also mark key dates in early Sikh history. First in importance is the spring Baisakhi. During this festival, which celebrates the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, new members of this group are initiated. On this day, the Sikh flag flown at homes and at gurudwaras is replaced. The fall festival of lights, Diwali, for Sikhs is the festival celebrating the release of the sixth guru, Hargobind, and fifty-two followers from imprisonment by the Mughals; the lamps that Sikhs light celebrate their heroic return home. Hola Mohalla, a festival of mischief and play for Hindus, is instead the yearly occasion when Sikhs compete in martial arts and remember the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, and the Sikh teaching of protecting the weak and standing up for justice.

## The Religious Institutions of Contemporary Hinduism

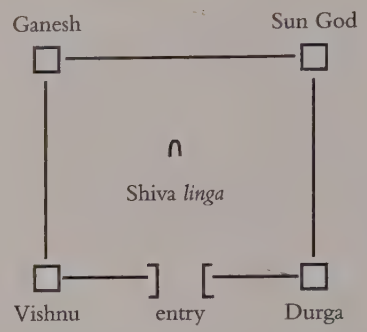
Although no single formal institution unifies all Hindus, there are standard relationships that support the regular practice of ritual and the transmission of religious ideas. Most families have a relationship with a brahmin family priest whom they call on when there is the need for a life-cycle rite or when someone wishes to perform a special puja.

The predominant religious institution of Hinduism, however, is the temple, and it is thought highly meritorious to build one that houses an icon. Temples built by the great kings demonstrate the most complete expressions of Hindu religious culture. The major temples are more than shrines; they include lands given to the deity, and their upkeep is supported by endowment funds that are continually augmented by the cash offered with puja. Some temples have become fabulously rich over the years: In the summer of 2011, the hidden treasury of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple in southern India was found to hold $22 billion in gold, jewels, and statues!

Temple lands are usually rented out to tenant farmers, with part of the harvest going to the temple; other properties adjacent to the temple are often rented to merchants or artisans. Both types of rentals provide income for the upkeep of the temple buildings and payment for the priests. Through these relationships, Hindu temples have been integral to the local economies of South Asia, sometimes as the major

## A Typical Smarta Shaiva Temple

One place of worship that can be found widely in upper-caste communities across the subcontinent is a Smarta temple, attended by a brahmin priest. In it, the major gods of the pantheon we have mentioned are enshrined, with the addition of the sun god, who presides over the astrological deities. Shiva usually is the central god, most often worshipped in his linga icon. The typical Smarta temple has the following standard layout:




landowners. Modern land reform has cut back on these holdings, however, forcing temples to find other means of support.

The more organized sects and sadhu orders rely on the *matha*, or monastery, to serve as a venue for schooling and training for ritual service under an abbot. Some modern groups, such as the Ramakrishna Mission, have built their reform movement through a network of mathas. Another familiar institution is the ashram, a retreat dedicated to supporting gurus and their disciples, thereby maintaining the relationship that is one of the central lifelines of Hindu culture.

### Changes and Continuities: Examples of Postcolonial Hinduism

Hinduism has assumed more forms today than ever in its history, and the linkage of religion to politics is growing. Since there is no one version or center of Hinduism that can stand alone, we will draw on a series of representative case studies to suggest the broad sweep of Hinduism in the postcolonial era. Here we meet modernizers, guru-based movements *not* influenced by science, and proponents of Hindu nationalism who object to India's being a secular state.

Modernizers abound in Hinduism today. Some teachers and movements begun during the modern era (e.g., the Ramakrishna Mission) make strong assertions about the compatibility between scientific thought and venerable Hindu doctrines. The "big bang" hypothesis of creation, relativity theory, and the cosmological theories of multiple universes are referred to by these modernizers as compatible with—and even anticipated in—the ancient scriptures. Hindu exponents have also proposed scientific explanations for rebirth and karma doctrines. Even the Vedas have been interpreted to credit the ancient seers with awareness of contemporary technological possibilities

(e.g., airplanes, genetics, and brain waves). Hindu confidence that the traditional teachings will stand up to whatever science discovers is striking among modernists. Just as many scientists around the world (including many in India) refrain from suggesting that their discoveries are ever likely to disprove the existence of God or the reality of spirit, many highly educated Hindus have found no reason to abandon the essentials of their faith. Recent events and developments indicate how Hinduism has endured so strongly among such modernists.

Temple in Madras. Large temples are complex institutions with landholdings, charities, and resident priests.

### *Ganesh's Milk Miracle*

A deity who attracts the devotion of nearly all Hindus is elephant-headed Ganesh, divine son of Shiva and Parvati. Ganesh temples are found in nearly every locale where Hindus live. On September 21, 1995, at temples across North India, priests and devotees reported that icons of Ganesh had begun to drink the cows' milk that was being offered to them as part of the daily puja. As the stories spread across the subcontinent, thousands of Hindus from all walks of life rushed to their local temples to offer milk, hoping to witness the phenomenon. And as news spread globally via the Internet, Hindus in London, Jersey City, Los Angeles, and Toronto began to report similar experiences.

For believers, this was merely the latest demonstration that the divine is alive, connected to humanity and capable of conferring grace on those who serve the gods. Whatever else this incident reveals about the role of the media and the Hindu diaspora, it also demonstrates that modern believers hold the conviction that the divine is immanent, a traditional view that has shifted little amid all the changes of the modern era.

The reaction was interesting, too: The "miracle" gave rise to widespread public debate and rallies organized by Hindu societies (e.g., New Delhi's "Guru Busters") whose

purpose is to expose charlatans and promote rational faith. Predecessors for these modern skeptics and atheists can be traced as far back as the time of the Buddha (fifth century BCE).

### *Comic Books and Televised Epics*

An important mass media format appearing well after the end of colonialism is the religious comic book. Adopting reformist doctrines and linking far-flung Hindu communities is the Amar Citra Katha series of over 270 titles, in which newly standardized versions of the great stories of Hindu scripture are offered in colorful, illustrated formats; the text is written in English and other Indian languages. In recent years, they have also been adapted into cartoon programs. This series has emphasized for middle-class readers that "true Hinduism" is rational, opposed to violent and superstitious, and is upheld by heroic devotees and based on the respectful accommodation of other spiritualties (Hindu and non-Hindu) in the interest of national integration.

Television broadcasts of religious epics have also been pivotal cultural events. In 1987–1988, India's national broadcasting system, Doordarshan, began showing in weekly installments its Hindi version of the *Ramayana*, one of the two great Hindu epics, calling it "the world's most viewed mythological series." An estimated weekly audience of 80 million to 100 million watched the program. The TV *Ramayana* was the first break with the practice of secular state media staying out of religion, and this series gave the nation its first "national version" of the epic, one that celebrates the glories of the legendary Hindu king Rama and his struggle to establish a just and prosperous Hindu nation. Families did puja to their TV sets and regarded viewing the episodes as religious darshan. Doordarshan has subsequently produced and broadcast an even longer series on Hinduism's second great epic, the *Mahabharata*, as well as dramatizations of other devotional stories centered on the great deities, such as Krishna and Shiva, and the proclamations of Hindu heroes such as Rama.

The accessibility of lavishly produced TV productions of religious epics, complete with special effects, has in places undercut the traditional relationship between priest, teacher, and devotees. As one observer noted, "It showed that ancient Hinduism is compatible with modernity, ready for a new tech and consumer age . . ."[6] Many argue, however, that Hindu nationalism has been strengthened by the common experience of viewing these sacred scenes.

### *The Dilemmas of Religious Suicide: A Bride Commits Sati and a Jain Nun Starves Herself to Death*

Following the norms of her caste and the Hindu law books, Roop Kanwar, an eighteen-year-old bride, went to live with her husband's family in the western Indian state of Rajasthan. But seven months later, on September 4, 1987, her husband, Mal Singh, died suddenly. Following ancient custom, the young man's kin prepared to cremate him on a pyre. What happened next shocked India: Roop Kanwar was also burnt alive atop her husband's funeral pyre before 500 witnesses, becoming a *sati* ("virtuous [one]"), and one of only forty-two known cases since 1947. What remains unclear were the widow's motivations and how freely she went to her death.

In India, countless comic books are devoted to describing the stories of the Hindu gods and human saints. Most are printed in the vernacular languages of the subcontinent, as well as in English. Shown here is a pivotal scene from the great epic, the *Ramayana*.

What is not unclear were the motivations of the "fast unto death," or ***santhara***, undertaken by Jain nun Prekshabai Mahasatiji in 2015, at the age of fifty-two. Jain doctrine defines the soul's bondage in samsara through the karma of physical pollution that binds the soul via both gross and subtle defilements; after a life devoted to vegetarian diet, absolute nonviolence, and meditation, final salvation still requires ending one's life by a purifying final fast. According to Jain doctrine, santhara burns up the film of karma that clogs the soul, allowing it to break free from the cycle of rebirth and death. The ordeal must also be approved by one's guru and family members. A nun since the age of 18, Prekshabai had asked her guru for permission to undertake the death fast repeatedly, but citing her age, he had refused, saying that at fifty-two she was too young. He changed his mind in June, however, when her doctors had concluded that chemotherapy could no longer treat her cancer. She took her vow to cut down on food and water and spent forty-seven days on a hospital bed inside her monastery, with over twenty caring for her as she lost control of her bodily functions. According to press reports, crowds amassed around her, spreading stories about a

**santhara:** Jain fast unto death, in search of moksha

divine glow. As her guru Muni Shri Prakashsundarji Swami reported, "She had a joy on her face that is indescribable . . . I would look at her and ask, 'Would you like to eat?' and she would smile and say, 'No.'"[7]

Rajasthan state officials were called to act on the Jain religious suicide as well as the reports of sati, both on the basis of India's National Penal Code that holds suicide in any form, including widow immolation, to be illegal and that those who assist are also subject to prosecution. Reformers argued that those connected with Roop Kanwar's death should be prosecuted as murderers; regarding santhara, they contended that it was a form of "elder abuse," in which elderly people were being encouraged to take the vow when they could no longer properly give consent and to free families of the economic burden of caring for the elderly. Under pressure from national politicians and women's groups, members of Mal Singh's immediate family were arrested. However, no charges were ever filed, as witnesses could not be found who were willing to testify. In Prekshabai's case, although Jain religious leaders defended the practice on the grounds of religious freedom, the Rajasthan State Court formally branded the act a crime, and supporters of any individual doing santhara as criminals.

Sati is one Hindu practice that the British actively sought to end through explicit legal prohibition. And the immolation of widows was held up for ridicule by many Hindu modernizers as evidence of how Indian society needed to break with blindly followed traditions and to reform its ways. Yet in 1987, over 50,000 devotees gathered for a commemorative ceremony for Roop Kanwar held thirteen days after her death; the site of the burning pyre has been transformed into a shrine, outside of which artisans still sell ritual photos and other mementos of Kanwar as a divine figure who was blessed by and merged with the mother goddess, Devi. The debate about this issue was renewed in 2008, when a seventy-one-year-old wife committed sati in eastern India. With studies suggesting that an average of 200 santharas a year have occurred annually in recent decades, controversy surrounds the question of whether a religious death is truly voluntary and whether the secular state should regulate this religious practice. Is the secular legal code that prohibits sati and santhara binding? Or, as Hindu traditionalists insist, should the state respect freedom of religion and allow Hindu women to follow this path to seek liberation? In the case of Jain practice, the Indian Supreme Court in October 2015 vacated the state court's ruling that every santhara should be regarded as an illegal suicide.

### *The Spiritual Marketplace for Neotraditionalism: Popular Guru-Based Movements*

Most conspicuous over the last decades has been the rise of cults and sects catering to the urban middle class. Focused on sadhus and drawing inspiration from the reformists and revivalists of the nineteenth century, most of the new sects attracting the support of the new and increasing middle class have proclaimed their own view of "essential Hinduism" as more belief oriented and less ritualistic. Just as modern technology has undercut to some extent the roles of priest and guru, the new sects have diminished the relevance of caste and regional social identity to spiritual seeking. A number of the

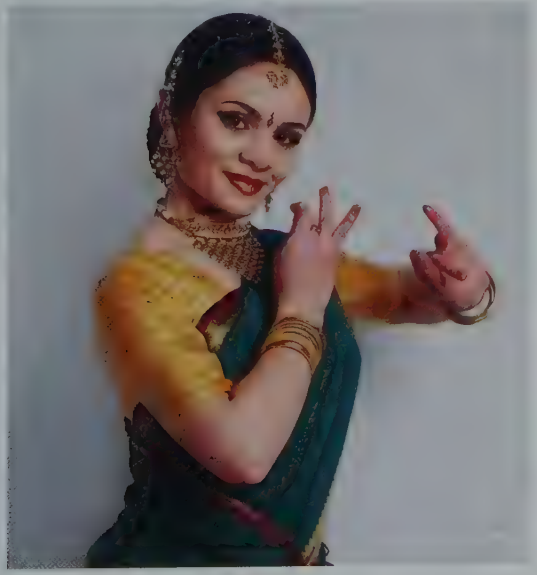
## GENDER FOCUS: The Divine Feminine and Hindu Women

Considering the role of women in Hinduism is a very confusing task, especially since there are many and varying ways to address this complicated issue.

One impression can be found in viewing a performance of classical Indian dance, *Bharatanatyam*, a tradition that has spread from South India and is now found across that country and is common in global performance as well. With subtle gestures and bold, rhythmically timed steps, the woman dancer portrays the great stories of the Hindu classics.

Another reality about Hindu women is that prescribed in the ancient texts. The *Laws of Manu* instruct men to control their women and for women to accept it as their sacred duty to obey first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally, their sons. Lesser good karma is said to be the reason for birth as a female, and the troubles of menstruation and childbirth are accordingly their burden. In public life, the submission of women to men is clear, a norm underwritten by religious sanction. Some temples forbid women from entering the innermost temple sanctuaries, a form of discrimination activists are now contesting. Among the many global Hindu gurus, there are a few women among a large male majority, but only in the esoteric tradition of tantra are women reckoned as equals.

Yet another powerful source of understanding the divine feminine in this tradition is the prominence of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. There is the peaceful Lakshmi, nurturing goddess of wealth; Saraswati, the sustainer of arts and learning; Durga, slayer of demons; and Kali, the scary embodiment of death's inevitability. Harnessing the divine energy (shakti) of the tantric Devi can lead to moksha. No religious tradition in the world has a richer diversity of goddesses who are worshipped, meditated on, and taken as embodiments of the ultimate reality.



new sects have quickly built an international membership, and most also emphasize women's participation. All, however, engage their society and include community development, medical service, and educational initiatives, combining various traditional Hindu doctrines and practices with others adopted from Protestant missionaries.

No modern Hindu saint has drawn devotees from as far and wide across India's urban middle classes as Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011), a teacher known as much for the miraculous feats credited to him as for his instruction. A vigorous opponent of Western cultural influences on Hindu civilization and individual Hindus, Sai Baba advocated an active life informed by scriptural study and charitable giving. The ashram he established in 1943 marked the beginning of a large global movement toward neotraditionalism.

Sai Baba's fame and stature were based on accounts of his supernormal feats of multiple presence, miracle cures, and materializing items out of the air, including sacred ash, food, books, and even Swiss watches. Through Sai Baba, disciples see two of the perennial themes nurtured in the myriad South Asian traditions: that the divine is alive and appears in human form and that this world is still enchanted with grace. His death in 2011 was reported widely in the global media.

In India today, the most ardent sectarian proselytizers (especially across the northern states) are from the group called Brahma Kumari. The visions and spiritual experiences of the founding guru, Lekhraj (1876–1969), a jeweler from Hyderabad, inspired an early following. In 1936, Lekhraj established the Brahma Kumari sect and turned his entire wealth over to the first community. Their Raja Yoga centers, also called "spiritual museums," draw interested individuals, primarily among urban dwellers. By 2016, these institutions were being maintained by 21,200 full-time religious teachers.

Lekhraj had visions portending the end of the world cycle. He attributed these visions to Shiva, the deity who commands the group's ritual attention. Lekhraj insisted that individuals engage in radical purifications to survive and to inherit paradise. Such cleansing could come only through celibacy, vegetarianism, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, and specific yoga practices. These traditional disciplines became the core practices of the Brahma Kumaris. The vow of celibacy, long an ideal for Hindu ascetics, is here extended to all householders. As a result, married couples who become disciples have to transform their marital relations to be expressions of "pure, noncarnal spiritual love." This teaching created serious domestic strife in the early community, leading to many leaving the group. As the group evolved, Brahma Kumaris evolved from being a reclusive sect to an aggressively outgoing one reaching out to the South Asian middle class.

Although its bhakti doctrines and cosmology could be characterized as drawn from premodern Hinduism and its silent meditation practices from traditional yoga, Brahma Kumari social practices are reformist and focused on women. The sect challenges Hindu society's patriarchal doctrines and ethical norms; it invites women to awaken to their divinity through connecting devotionally with the powers of traditional Hindu goddesses.

In recent years, the Brahma Kumaris have won recognition from India's leading politicians for supporting the establishment of a "value-based society," as members

work with UN agencies on educational projects across South Asia. In the last decade, the Brahma Kumaris have claimed status as an independent religion, rejecting the label of "Hindu." In 2016, the group counted membership at 1 million. Over 8,500 Brahma Kumari centers exist, most in India and Nepal, but also now are found in over 110 countries.

## The Connection of Religion with Philanthropy and Social Reform

The impact of Christianity on Hinduism, as we noted earlier, was to suggest the role of modern religious institutions and the scope of religious service in society. Just as Christian missionaries had shown that churches could be linked with schools and hospitals, Hindu reformers (e.g., the Ramakrishna Mission and Sai Baba) have included social welfare initiatives to address the nation's needs. Initially, perhaps, this was done in competition with the Western missionaries, but the idea also found support from many Hindu teachers promoting the spiritual power of selfless, compassionate service and extolling individuals to engage in humanitarian merit-making. As a result, many Hindu mathas have started educational institutions, clinics, orphanages, and hospitals.

New Hindu organizations address the poverty and suffering endemic in South Asia. A prominent example of this engagement with contemporary problems is the pollution in the Ganges River. As governments and corporations elsewhere in the industrial world have done to their rivers, in India 118 urban municipal governments have used this sacred river as a sewer, and 764 private companies have dumped their untreated factory wastes in it. Hence, in many places, the Ganges has dangerous water toxicity and pollutant levels. So pernicious has this problem become that, at the end of the great Kumbha Mela pilgrimage in 2013, thousands of Hindu holy men staged two days of protest and filed a lawsuit; they even threatened to lead others to boycott the next festival unless the government immediately began corrective actions to clean up the river. The BJP and Prime Minister Modi campaigned in 2014 with a promise to clean up the river from beginning to end. It remains to be seen, however, whether the convictions of religious leaders can really counterbalance the power of industrialists.

## Religious Nationalism: Secular India and Its Discontents

As noted earlier, many of India's anticolonial nationalist leaders were educated in England, and more than a few were unalterably committed to creating modern India as a secular democracy. They knew that religious strife in Europe had led to the formation of most modern Western nations, and they wanted to avoid the problems among the complex and competing religious communities in India that would inevitably result if any sectarian favoritism were shown. In the end, they succeeded, with British help, in marginalizing nationalist groups such as the RSS that wanted to establish India as a Hindu nation.

In practice, however, the democratic and secular Indian state has proved to be an ally of the high castes, particularly brahmins, in comparison with the situation under British rule. This has led to the suggestion that, in its actual workings, India's "secular state" really amounts to a form of "neo-Brahminism." In 2000, for example, brahmins held about 70 percent of civil service jobs but comprised only 3 percent of the population. Yet in a paradoxical development, and despite the state administration's bias toward their interests, high-caste politicians have convinced growing numbers of citizens that Hindus have been discriminated against by the laws and policies of secular India. Thus, beginning in the 1990s, the BJP, the party controlled by members of the upper castes, campaigned on the basis of promises to establish a strong Hindu nation. Victories in state and national elections came in 1998.

The BJP and its high-caste supporters have sought to reverse the secular state's efforts to uplift Muslims and others among the lowest castes who are equally impoverished. During the first months of BJP rule, massacres in lower-caste settlements were reported across North India; then, in 2002, anti-Muslim riots in the state of Gujarat, allegedly abetted by its BJP government, resulted in over 2,000 Muslims dead, with 35,000 left homeless. A group of outside, independent judges collected testimony and summarized these horrific events:

> Hindutva hooligans came out into the streets . . . and in all flaming fury, targeted innocent and helpless Muslims. They were brutalized by miscreants uninhibited by police; their women were unblushingly molested; and Muslim men, women, and children, in a travesty of justice, were burnt alive.[8]

International human rights investigators concluded that this pogrom was fomented by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (see next section) and its youth wing, the Bajrang Dal. Yet few arrests were ever made in Gujarat. Not surprisingly, Muslim resentments, calls for revenge, and terrorist reprisals directed against the Hindu majority have increased across India, and Pakistan has been blamed for complicity. Although the BJP lost power in the national Parliament, it once again won in 2014 and in 2019, led by Gujarat's chief minister during these 2002 riots, Narendra Modi. Modi won by emphasizing his record of economic development and plans to enhance public health, including a cleanup of the Ganges River. But anti-Muslim activities across India and aggressive attempts to revise school curriculums to conform to Hindu fundamentalist ideology—anti-Muslim, pro-fascist (exalting Hitler), and historically fallacious (e.g., claims that the Indus Valley civilization was Vedic)—have increased as well.

### *The Vishva Hindu Parishad: Hindu Leaders in Search of a Religious Nation*

**Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP):** organization of religious leaders that promotes the creation of a Hindu India

Linked to the RSS and the BJP, the **Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP),** or Council of All Hindus, was founded in 1964 as an organization of religious leaders who, while retaining their own disciples and spiritual agendas, wished to promote the interests of Hindus and restore spiritual Hinduism. In agreement with earlier reformers as well as some European colonialists, the VHP views Hinduism as in decline, seeks the roots of the faith in the earliest texts, and considers the *Bhagavad Gita* to be Hinduism's most authoritative scripture.

The VHP argues that the era before Muslim rule (1192 CE) was a golden age for Hinduism, a time of social egalitarianism, prosperity, just rulers, and a wealth of enlightened seers. But with the Muslim conquest and such actions as their razing temples to build mosques, Hindu culture declined; subsequent British domination of India made matters worse, causing additional stagnation and division among all groups. Similarly, the VHP views the secular state of India created in 1947 as a further means of dividing Hindus and thwarting the establishment of a great civilization centered on "Vedic spirituality." But if this secularism can be overthrown, it argues, and with it a mindset of inferiority induced during the colonial period, then another golden age can begin. Accordingly, the VHP has voiced support for dismantling any mosques that were (in the party's historical determination) built over Hindu temples in centuries past. The destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 attracted attention to the group and support from ultranationalists, as did the VHP's marketing scheme to raise funds by selling bricks for the construction of the new Hindu temple planned for the site. The VHP leaders still express their wish to see other Muslim shrines removed from Benares and Mathura, and many defend the 2002 massacres against Muslims in Gujarat as being brought on by Muslims themselves.

Such confrontations with the secular constitution of India continue. In 2007, after BJP leaders in the state of Madhya Pradesh passed laws requiring the public

Indian schoolchildren in Bhopal performing yoga exercises sponsored by the state government of Madhya Pradesh.

school curriculum to include elementary school yoga exercises accompanied by devotional chanting, a state court struck down the legislation soon after, enraging the Hindu majority across the country. Since 2014, India's national, state, and local governments ruled by the BJP have stood by as Hindu mobs have killed dozens of Muslim and low-caste butchers for slaughtering cattle, a legal action. In 2019, Hindu mobs attacked a Muslim neighborhood in New Delhi, as police stood by or joined in as mobs targeted mosques, businesses, and homes. Scores of online critics have been arrested after posting social media posts critical of the BJP leader.

### *Sikh Separatism and Globalization*

With greater recognition of the religious pluralism of diverse global communities, differences in ritual beliefs and practices are becoming more widely known. In a parody of the cartoon *South Park*, Sikh cartoonist Dalbir points out difficulties of following religious law. Although many Sikhs are vegetarian, Sikh dietary rules allow the consumption of all meats if the animal was slaughtered compassionately

Because the British invested heavily in irrigation and infrastructure in the Punjab, by the postcolonial era the Sikh home territory had become one of the most productive agricultural regions of India. But partition was a terrible blow to the Sikhs, as it divided their Punjab homeland and put Sikhs between not just fleeing Muslim and Hindu refugees, but also the shocking massacres each inflicted on the other. Sikhs had to flee to India and abandon holy sites in the Pakistan Punjab; subsequently, Indian politicians divided up the Indian Punjab in ways that were regarded as discriminatory against the Sikh majority. Although Sikhs nonetheless became one of the wealthiest ethnic groups in postcolonial India, many who were left out felt aggrieved by these events.

Despite Sikh prosperity, these grievances attracted more Sikhs to radical leaders, who in the 1980s revived a demand for a Sikh homeland in Punjab, following the logic that had led to the creation of Pakistan as the homeland for South Asian Muslims. Sikh guerrillas tried to carve out this region into a separate state they called Khalistan, extorting contributions they identified as "taxes" from Sikh farmers and merchants while randomly murdering Hindus living there. The movement was funded as well by contributions from Sikhs abroad.

In 1984, after armed secessionist leaders occupied the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Indian government sent troops to invade this shrine to arrest a separatist militant named Bhindranwale. In this operation, there were casualties on both sides, including the death of Bhindranwale. The Golden Temple complex also suffered a great deal of damage due to the fighting. Many Sikhs regarded the state's intervention as a desecration of their holiest shrine.

Later in the year, prime minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two Sikh bodyguards, who had been outraged by the sacrilege. The murder

triggered waves of violence. By the turn of the millennium, the separatist agitation had largely dissipated as moderate Sikhs came back into power in national politics and international support for an independent state declined.

Through the last decades of the twentieth century, the Sikh global migration continued, and now almost 15 percent of Sikhs live outside India. With over 23 million followers worldwide, including a growing number of Western converts, Sikhism is slowly being recognized for its distinctive traditions of devotion and philanthropy. In the United States, increasing numbers of Sikhs serve in the military or police forces; in 2019, a Sikh priest for the first time delivered an invocation for the US Senate.

## A Growing Global Tradition

Hinduism appears in Western awareness through yoga and meditation and the increasing use of "karma" in personal conversations, with much less focus on ritual or law. For many, of course, this interest is confined to the athletic or health benefits, with the religious beliefs underlying the practices often downplayed or tailored to fit the practitioner's existing belief system.

The Indian diaspora is increasingly important in the process of Hindu globalization. First and second generations of Indians who settled in the United States are the nation's richest ethnic group in terms of per capita income, and the majority, who are Hindu, has supported the internationalization of the faith. Temples are the natural centers for cultural awareness and revitalization movements among immigrant Hindus.

Hindu nationalists have also spread their activism in America through temple institutions and summer camps for youth. The VHP has raised funds for causes back in India. Its members have established summer religious camps for children, and its ideologues have tried to have public school textbooks in California rewritten to conform to their ideological interpretations of Indian history and Hinduism.

All immigrant Hindus today must submerge many of their regional traditions in joining with coreligionists from all over India to provide a simplified, working definition of "Hinduism." Indicative of this trend is the work of the Pancajanya Project founded by devout Hindus in the Asian-American Hotel Owner's Association: Since 2008, they have placed over 150,000 copies of the *Bhagavad Gita* in hotel rooms in thirty states. Converts and immigrant groups also have supported the global extensions of religious centers founded by modern gurus.

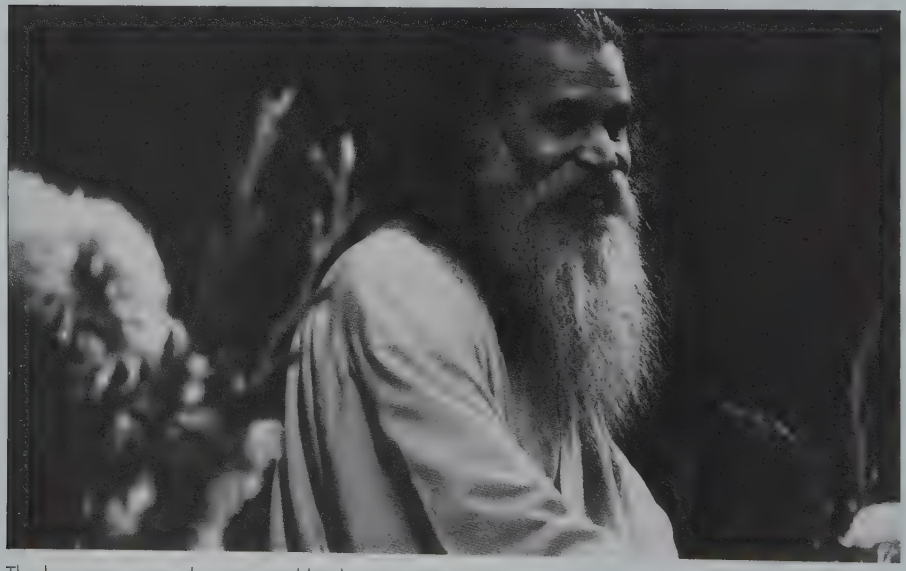
There are now hundreds of Hindu gurus who travel regularly from India to the West to give teachings. Several have shifted to ashrams and yoga centers outside India to dedicate their lives to their Western converts and South Asian immigrants. Perhaps the most successful of all the global Hindu gurus was the sadhu Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who in the 1960s came to prominence by giving spiritual instruction to the

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Swami Satchidananda's Moksha

After starting life in South India, studying agriculture, marrying, and fathering two sons, the sudden death of his wife led the future teacher to go off on a pilgrimage to many holy sites across South Asia. After being initiated as a sadhu, he took the name Satchitananda, adopted vegetarianism, ardently practiced yoga, and retreated to holy sites for intensive meditative retreats. In his autobiography, this popular teacher described the decisive spiritual experience of in his life in these terms: "My highest experience . . . of Advaita Oneness was in 1949, a few months after my *sannyas* initiation [as a celibate ascetic]. It was in midwinter, when I visited Vasishta Cave, where the sage Vasishta performed austerities. I went into the cave, . . . where I reached a large room with a seat. As I sat there and meditated, I had the experience of transcending my body and mind, realizing myself as the Omnipresent. I forgot my individuality. It is impossible to explain exactly what this is. I must have spent several hours in that state. Then I heard a humming sound, OM chanting, coming from a long distance away. Slowly, slowly, it became louder. As it neared I became aware of my mind and body. . . . For some time, I couldn't see anything in the normal way. All over I saw light, light, light. The whole world appeared as a mass of light. There was only peace and peace was everywhere. The state persisted the whole day. I have had this experience very often, mostly when I visit a holy place."

Swami Satchidananda (1914–2002) went on to become a guru whose teaching was centered in North America, founding an ecumenical movement called *Integral Yoga* in 1966. Since 1986, Integral Yoga has been centered in Yogaville, a thousand-acre ashram in rural Virginia, and has spread to twenty-eight countries and nearly 400 centers across North America.

Source: From Sita Wiener, *Swami Satchidananda* (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 88.



The bow asana, as demonstrated by the yoga master and guru Swami Satchidananda.

Across Europe and North America, increasingly affluent immigrant communities are building magnificent, traditional Hindu temples. This temple in Omaha, Nebraska, opened in 2004.

Beatles. His movement, **Transcendental Meditation**, has taken Hindu yoga tradition across the globe and inspired a long agenda for utopian initiatives.

**Transcendental Meditation:** movement founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi that brought yoga meditation teachings to the West

As India has become an important player in the global computer and software business, older Hindu institutions and new movements have adopted internet technology. For example, a famous Ganesh temple in Bombay has set up a website at which viewers can have live darshan of the main icons, hear hymns being sung, and make contributions to sponsor pujas. The website of a Vishnu shrine in the northern state of Jammu offers similar scenes and services, adding maps, regularly updated weather reports, and hostel bookings to aid the estimated 4 million pilgrims who visit the temple annually in person.

Recent observers have discerned the rise of "karma capitalism." Here, we can recognize Hindu teachings exerting a new and powerful influence in the global marketplace of ideas. Indian philosophies have been integrated in elite business schools in a variety of ways: "Self-mastery" courses now help to train managers to boost their leadership skills and find inner peace in lives dominated by work. Hindu "business gurus" in workshops teach that executives should conceive of companies in more holistic ways, to redefine success as larger than monetary profit, including the well-being of employees, customers, and the environment. Human resources initiatives at companies such as General Mills, Google, Aetna Insurance, and Target now regularly include yoga and meditation to benefit their employees and improve corporate productivity. Classical Hindu beliefs and practices have now become a creative influence on the culture of modern multinational business, with many now explicitly managing their enterprises to generate "good karma."[9]

Like immigrant communities across the world today, Hindu parents create programs that instill traditional religious beliefs and practices.

## Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, Hinduism assumes more forms than it ever has before, and the linkage of religion to politics is growing. Since it is impossible to take any religious tradition as standing for all of "Hinduism," we can only generalize about the broad patterns of change affecting the religion in South Asia. Rapid economic development of India continues to draw migrants from rural settlements to burgeoning urban areas, transforming the life experiences of millions. In these settings, the Hindu traditions of the premodern world are in decline as new institutions and teachers arise to meet the needs of those living under these new circumstances.

Even with so much change, however, the belief in the spiritual presence of the gods, in yoga, and in the guru-centered spiritual life remains strong. In the cities, among the rapidly expanding middle class as well as slum dwellers, there are numerous new incarnations of "organized Hinduisms." Hitherto-independent groups such as sadhus from different regions are forming new organizations to work for common interests. Likewise, laity and priests associated with major temples have pressed for the establishment of management committees to orchestrate rituals and festivals as well as to supervise temple accounts. Thus, what in rural India was a largely preordained relationship with a family priest and local guru has, in urban settings, become a matter of individual choice. Hindus in ever-increasing numbers, then, are faced with the "heretical imperative" (as discussed in Chapter 1) of making their own choices about their own religious paths.

## CONTRASTING RELIGIOUS VISIONS: Visions of Hinduism in the 21st Century

As the following contrasting visions indicate, every religious tradition is capable of generating both visions that encourage peace and understanding and visions that encourage conflict and violence.

### Peacemaker: Pandurang Shastri Athavale and the Swadhyaya ("Truth Seekers")

Pandurang Athavale (1920–2003) grew up in a family that was active in movements sponsored by Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Mahatma. In 1956, he began organizing social uplift programs for the poorest low-caste groups, also drawing on a modernist reading of Hinduism's great spiritual classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Living modestly as a householder, Athavale preferred to be called Dadaji ("Elder Brother"), resisting the usual trappings of the title "guru." His social programs have reached an estimated 20 million people living in 100,000 villages. The scope of this movement is due to the practice of *bhaktipheri*, or devotional visits, in which he or his followers spread the message of human service to new communities. His message is simple:

> It is my experience that awareness of the nearness of God and reverence for that power creates reverence for self, reverence for the other, reverence for nature, and reverence for the entire creation. And devotion as an expression of gratitude for God can turn into a social force to bring about transformative changes at all levels in the society.[10]

Acting on this conviction, members of Athavale's organization, called *Swadhyaya*, help build new temples that are ecumenical and open to all and community centers for cooperative activities. Swadhyaya has become a worldwide movement, with 350 centers in the United States alone. The magnitude of the work and the authentic spirituality of the movement were the reason Athavale was awarded the 1997 Templeton Prize, regarded as the world's pre-eminent award for excellence in religious pursuits.

### Confrontationalist: Voices from the Vishva Hindu Parishad

Arguing that Hindus have suffered from disunity, mindless pacifism, and Muslim predations over the last millennium, leaders associated with the VHP, or "Council of All Hindus," have argued for revival by means of changing these old and decadent religious habits. An official inquiry on the Hindu–Muslim rioting in Bombay in 1993 reported that the responsibility lay in gangs of Hindus led by the Shiva Sena ("Shiva's Army"), a VHP ally. Members of this group went on a rampage, setting gasoline fires that burned Muslim businesses and homes. In the end, at least 1,200 Muslims died. A Shiva Sena leader commented several years afterward, "Who are these Muslims? If the Shiva Sena comes to power, everybody will take an initiation of the Hindu religion [to become Hindu]."[11] Similar uncompromising sentiments are now being conveyed by flashy, multimedia performances by entertainer Laxmi Dubey across India. In 2019, her songs included refrains such as "Every house will be saffron" (the BJP color), "Jai Shri Ram" (Victory to Lord Rama), and "Spill blood in Mother's holy court" as she mimicked shooting an arrow. When asked about her songs getting 50 million views on YouTube, Dubey said her goal was not really anti-Muslim, but "to recruit foot soldiers to make India a Hindu nation."[12]

In addition, as middle-class South Asians have raised their educational level, experienced rising prosperity, and encountered religions and societies elsewhere, they have been inevitably forced to consider "Hinduism" in comparison to these other belief systems and cultures. Buoyed by the rise of the BJP and its promotion of their religion, Hindu nationalists attribute India's recent successes as being due to their new expressions of devotion. Critics point out that Hindu leaders have failed to curb blatant caste and gender discrimination or work for the common good to lessen the rate of India's extreme poverty, with 39 percent of its children malnourished.

Among the many voices of Hinduism today, nationalists seeking a religious state contend with secularists for political power. The voices, aspirations, and wealth of Hindus now living outside of South Asia are also part of global Hinduism, in which new possibilities and reforms are being envisioned. The daunting task is for Hindus to mobilize their beliefs, values, and conscience to serve the needs of all its adherents, who now number over 1.3 billion.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is a brahmin essential to Vedic ritual?
2. What reasons might be suggested for the transformation of the polytheism of the early Vedic peoples into the monism and theism of later Hinduism?
3. Compare and contrast the spiritual practice of the shaman (Chapter 2) with that of the yoga practitioner. Is it possible to know exactly how different their experiences are?
4. Why would the lowest castes regard the doctrines of karma, caste, and duty as a system designed to subjugate them?
5. What reasons would a woman have for abiding by her dharma?
6. To what extent can karma theory be considered to be a doctrine of fatalism? Do humans still have freedom of action?
7. If you were an Islamic judge in Mughal India, how would you advise the local sultan who asks if his subjects who follow Krishna (as depicted in the *Bhagavad Gita*) are in fact monotheists?
8. How does ritualism express the ideals of bhakti Hinduism?
9. Why was the influence of colonialism on the religions of India powerfully conveyed by the term *Protestant Hinduism*?
10. What reasons are Hindu nationalists giving to support their view that the creation of India as a secular country is a perpetuation of colonialism and a betrayal of Hindu ideals?
11. Explain why Mohandas K. Gandhi's biography reveals many of the factors shaping modern Hindu reform.

12. Critique the following statement, from an ecumenical Hindu: "I can follow Jesus without contradiction, for he is none other than another *avatara* of Lord Vishnu."
13. What does it say about the power of ideas regarding the sacred versus the power of profane modern economic interests that the Ganges is now in danger of becoming a toxic waterway?
14. How do Sikh traditions both differ from and find agreement with the teachings of the Hindu philosophy and also those of Islam?
15. If you visited a Sikh gurudwara, how would the activities there reflect Sikh beliefs?
16. What is lost, and what is gained, by the addition of virtual temple visits to the Hinduism of today?
17. Why have Jains found the career of jewelry and gem trade especially apt given their religious ethics?

## Key Terms

Adi Granth
ahimsa
Arya Samaj
ashram
atman
avataras
avidya
*Bhagavad Gita*
*bhakti*
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)
Brahman
brahmins
darshan
dharma
Gandhi, Mohandas K.
gurus
gurudwara
Hindutva
Janam Sakhis
Kali Yuga
karma
Khalsa
mathas
maya
moksha
monism
nirguna Brahman
Om-kara
prasad
puja
puranas
Ramakrishna Mission
Ramanuja
Rammohan Roy
Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS)
saguna Brahman
samsara
Sat Guru
satyagraha
Shaivite
shaktas
shakti
Shankara
siddha
tantra
Tattvabodhini Sabha
Tirtha
*Tirthankara*
Transcendental Meditation (TM)
Upanishads
Vaishnavite
Vedas
Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)
yoga
*Yoga Sutras*

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## Additional Resources

BBC Religions: Hinduism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism). Excellent information and useful links, regularly updated.

Hindu Ritualism Online (www.onlinedarshan.com). A clearinghouse for access to temples across the Indian subcontinent.

Hinduism Today (www.hinduismtoday.com). Online site of a leading magazine covering contemporary events and traditions.

The Hindu Universe (www.hindunet.org). A gateway to many websites for case studies in belief and practice.

India Pilgrim Tours (http://pilgrimagetourinindia.com/spiritual-pilgrimage.htm). An example of the breadth of spiritual tourist tours now available to affluent Hindus.

Jain Dharma Online (www.jaindharmonline.com). Website on Jain texts, traditions, and teachings in a modern perspective.
Sikhs.org (www.sikhs.org). A source for texts in translation and many other topics.
Shughpuga (shubhpuja.com). A commercial site that offers over 150 pujas and astrological consultancy for clients, who can participate as patrons as the priests perform the rite.
Sikhs.org (www.sikhs.org). A source for texts in translation and many other topics.

## Notes

1. Most Sikhs regard their faith as constituting a separate religion that rejects the authority of the Veda, the legitimacy of brahmin priesthood, and the associated ideology of caste. While we will point out how these and other contrasts came to define a very successful and distinctive tradition, we cover Sikhism and Jainism within this chapter for thematic consistency with other chapters treating similar patterns of diversity (Christianity and Islam).
2. Daniel Gold, "Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation," in M. E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 581.
3. For the sake of simplicity, in this text we use *brahmin* to indicate the priestly caste and *Brahman* to indicate the "world spirit," though in fact they are similar Sanskrit words: *brahman* and *brahmana*, respectively.
4. Quoted in W. Owen Cole, "Sikhism," in John R. Hinnells, ed., *A Handbook of Living Religions* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 240.
5. Patwant Singh, *The Sikhs* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 23.
6. Raul Verma, "The TV Show that Transformed Hinduism," *BBC.com*, October 22, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191022-the-tv-show-that-transformed-hinduism
7. "An End-of-Life Fast Clashes with Indian Law," *New York Times*, August 25, 2015, p. A4.
8. Quoted in the *Financial Times* (London), March 31, 2007, Section FT, p. 1.
9. "Business Filter," *Boston Globe*, October 30, 2006, p. E-2.
10. *Hinduism Today*, June 1997, p. 35.
11. *India Today*, January 15, 1996, p. 25.
12. *New York Times*, November 11, 2019.

ZEN

# BUDDHISM

7

## Paths Toward Nirvana

### Overview

Popular culture is full of images, stereotypes, and impressions of Buddhism. A long list of celebrities from rock, sports, and show business have identified themselves as followers of the Buddha, and the Dalai Lama is one of the most recognized religious leaders in the world. The adjective *Zen* is a cliché in advertising, while stress reduction techniques (like "mindfulness") based on Buddhist meditation are increasingly popular. Yet while the globalization of Buddhist tradition may be accelerating, many misconceptions about Buddhism remain.

When Asian Buddhists meet Western Buddhist converts, both often find each other hard to comprehend. Individuals attending programs at Dharma Centers in the West go primarily for meditation, whereas this practice in Asia is less visible and secondary to temple rituals and donation ceremonies. Likewise, the recitation of "go for refuge" is a simple ritual rarely heard in America, but for over 2,500 years, taking refuge has been a daily practice for Asian Buddhists, thus reaffirming one's devotion at the start of every ritual: *Buddham Saranam Gacchami* (I go for refuge in the Buddha), *Dharmam Saranam Gacchami* (I go for refuge in the teachings), *Sangham Saranam Gacchami* (I go for refuge in the community).

◀ Buddhist spiritual practices have proven attractive to many in the fast-paced, often-stressful centers of global civilization.

# Buddhism Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 563 BCE | Birth of Siddhartha [some scholars date as 463 BCE] |
| 528 | Enlightenment of Shakyamuni, the Buddha; creation of the *sangha*, the monastic order |
| ca. 510 | Establishment of nuns' order |
| 483 | Death of the Buddha [some scholars date as 383 BCE] |
| 482 | First Council collects and organizes oral accounts |
| 383 | Council of Vaishali leads to the first split in the sangha |
| 273–232 | Reign of Ashoka, convert to Buddhism, who spread Buddhism throughout India and beyond (Afghanistan, Burma, Sri Lanka) |
| 250 | Council of Pataliputra leads to division into "18 schools" |
| 240 | Sanchi stupa and other stupas built across India; relic cult at stupas central to community |
| ca. 100 | Origins of the Mahayana school, beginning with *Prajnaparamita* literature |
| 80 | First collections of written canon begun, beginning with the *Vinayas*, the monastic code; Pali Canon collection begun in Sri Lanka |
| 50 CE–180 CE | Spread of Buddhism into central Asia via the Silk Road |
| ca. 85 CE | Composition of the *Lotus Sutra* |
| 124 | Buddhist monks in western China |
| ca. 200 | Writings of Nagarjuna, the most influential Mahayana philosopher; Madhyamaka school formed |
| 220–589 | Buddhist missions reach Southeast Asia, Java, Sumatra, Korea, Japan, Vietnam; Buddhist monasteries established throughout China in era of weak central state |
| ca. 300 | Rituals dedicated to bodhisattvas developed by Mahayana monks |
| ca. 300 | Origins of Pure Land school in India |
| 320–ff. | Development of Yogacara school, led by monastic brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu |
| ca. 425 | Writings of a monk who shaped the Theravada school, Buddhaghosa, in Sri Lanka |
| ca. 500 | Rise of the Vajrayana Thunderbolt school in India, which eventually dominates Buddhist communities in northeastern India, Nepal, and Tibet |
| ca. 600 | Formation of the Ch'an school in China inspired by teachings of the legendary Indian monk Bodhidharma |
| 700–1270 | Buddhism dominates Sri Vijaya kingdom on Sumatra-Java; rulers build Borobodur stupa |
| 749 | First Buddhist monastery in Tibet |
| 760–1142 | Pala Dynasty rules North India, patronizes Buddhist monasteries, and promotes Mahayana traditions; tradition in decline elsewhere in India |
| 841–845 | Extensive destruction of monasteries in China and defrocking of Buddhist monks and nuns |
| 850–ff. | Restoration of Chinese Buddhism, principally the Pure Land and Ch'an schools |
| ca. 1000 | Second introduction of monastic Mahayana Buddhism into Tibet from India |
| 1000–1400 | Era of Pagan Kingdom in Burma, establishing one of the great centers of Buddhism |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1200 | Muslim rule established across northern India |
| 1200–1400 | Destruction of most North Indian monasteries; decline of Bodh Gaya as center of Buddhist pilgrimage |
| 1193–1227 | In Japan, formation of new schools: Zen brought from China by Eisei (1141–1215) and Dogen (1200–1253); Pure Land by Honen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1262), and school founded by Nichiren (1222–1282) |
| 1642–1959 | Tibet dominated by Gelugpa monastic school under the Dalai and Panchen lamas |
| 1800–1947 | Era of British colonial rule; conflicts in Sri Lanka lead to reformist movement styled as "Protestant Buddhism" that influences Buddhists across Asia |
| 1864–1933 | Anagarika Dharmapala, Sri Lankan reformist, founder of the Mahabodhi Society, who spread reformism across Asia |
| 1871–1876 | Meiji state in Japan persecutes Buddhism; 70 percent of monasteries lost as 75 percent of monks marry |
| 1877–1945 | Buddhist establishment in Japan supports nationalism, militarism, and seizures of territory in Korea, Taiwan, and northern China |
| 1944 | Buddhist Churches of America, a Pure Land organization, founded in California |
| 1945 | Soka Gakkai established in Japan, a branch of Nichiren school until 1991 |
| 1949–1976 | Chinese Communist government persecutes Buddhists and seizes 250,000 monasteries and temples, with the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) a period of intense destruction |
| 1954–1956 | Sixth Buddhist Council in Rangoon, Burma, culminating in the marking of the 2,500-year anniversary of Shakyamuni's death |
| 1959–Present | Exile of the fourteenth Dalai Lama from Tibet, beginning the globalization of Tibetan Buddhism |
| 1976–Present | Slow, partial restoration of Buddhist institutions in China |
| 1982–2009 | Civil war against Tamil minority in Sri Lanka polarizes Buddhist community |
| 1987 | Founding of Shakyaditya, a worldwide organization of Buddhist women |
| 1989 | Founding of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists by Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa |
| 1990 | Revival of Buddhism in Mongolia after 88 years of suppression |
| 1991 | Founding of *Tricycle*, a Buddhist mass-market magazine in America |
| 1998–Present | Full ordination taken by Theravada nuns in Chinese monasteries, reviving a lost tradition |
| 2007 | Monks lead democracy protests in Burma, resulting in fierce government repression of sangha |
| 2008 | Uprisings across Tibet lead to Chinese government crackdown |
| 2009 | Civil war in Sri Lanka ends |
| 2012–2015 | Monks in Burma organize violent mobs that burn Muslim settlements and drive Muslims to refugee camps |
| 2016–2017 | Incidents of conflict between Sri Lankan Buddhists and Muslims |
| 2018 | Attacks by Burmese military-backed, anti-Muslim, monk-led group Ma Ba Tha lead to 6,000 Rohingyas killed and 655,000 refugees fleeing to Bangladesh |

There is considerable diversity among those who "go for refuge." In the Himalayas, a Tibetan monk seals himself into a cave retreat for three years and three months of meditative solitude. In the heart of urban Seoul, Korea, a media executive declares the opening of a Buddhist cable TV channel at a press conference in the ultramodern headquarters of a major Buddhist reform organization. In Singapore, as householders gather to view 2,500-year-old bone relics of the Buddha, monks chant and extol the blessings of worshipping these mortal remains. All take refuge, all are following their country's Buddhist tradition, yet the diversity is astounding.

Buddhists in all these places revere an image of the Buddha, who is seated in meditation, serene and exemplary, but one cannot help but wonder what the historical Buddha might say if he heard how differently these disciples today construe his teachings. The oldest of the world's missionary religions, and perhaps the most accommodating to adaptation in its global diaspora, Buddhism is experiencing a modest revival in most areas of the world today after having suffered setbacks throughout the modern era. To understand Buddhism, we will explore the peoples and cultures of Eurasia: from the homeland on the plains of the Ganges River in South Asia into the high Himalayas, across the tropical states of Southeast Asia and over the central Asian deserts, and throughout the imperial domains of China, Korea, and Japan.

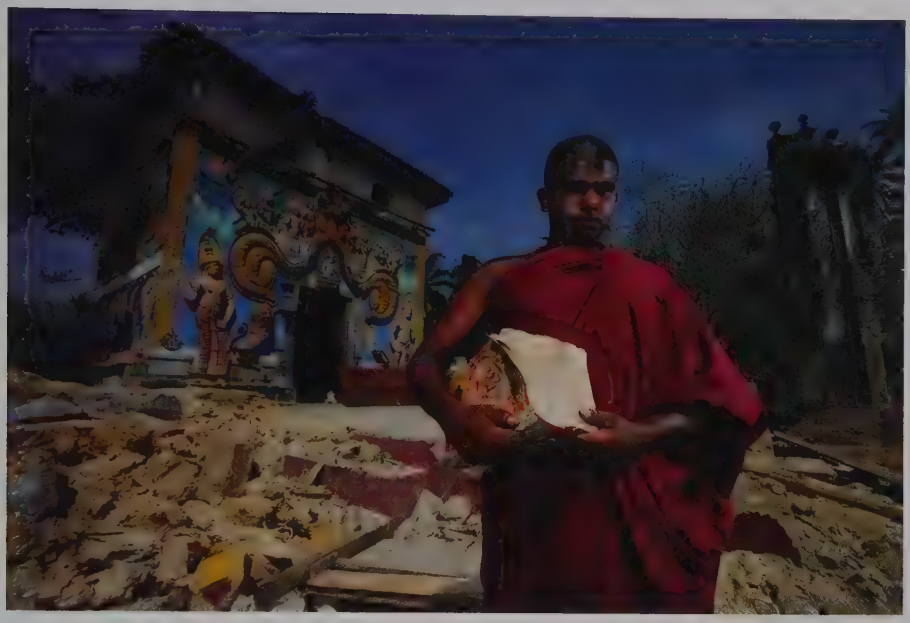
This chapter will examine how Buddhism in its creative diversity has sought to direct devotees to follow the three refuges. We will sketch the life of the Buddha, explore his basic teachings, and chart the various interpretations as the tradition spread by monks, nuns, and merchants reaching from North India to East Asia, Southeast Asia, and in the last two centuries to Europe and the West.

**Mahayana:** "Great Vehicle"; the dominant school of Buddhism in Nepal, Tibet, and East Asia

**Theravada:** traditionalists; school of Buddhism dominant in South and Southeast Asia

Rough estimates place the number of Buddhists at 395 million, making it the fourth-largest among world religions. Over 98 percent live in Asia. Buddhists today are divided into two factions, those following the **Mahayana**, or "Great Vehicle," and those following the **Theravada**, or "Teachings of the Elders." Roughly 62 percent of Buddhists today are adherents of the Mahayana, and 38 percent are followers of the Theravada. With most Mahayanists located in the countries north of the tropics, the label "Northern Buddhism" is sometimes used for this grouping, as opposed to the "Southern Buddhism" of the Theravadins. In a half-dozen Asian states (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Japan), Buddhists comprise the overwhelming majority of the population. They are significant minorities in Nepal, China, South Korea, and Singapore, while their presence in Malaysia (10 percent), Indonesia (3 percent), and India is less marked. (It should be noted that specific percentages, figures taken from Western almanac sources, are at best rough estimates.)

Although modern Buddhist activists and intellectuals may debate exactly "what the Buddha really taught," Buddhism's basic teachings about life, mortality, and spiritual development continue to inspire adherents amid the often-traumatic changes of recent centuries. In every land, venerable institutions and reformist groups alike are adapting the faith to the changing world and reviving the essential practices that lead to Buddhism's perennial threefold goals: establishing moral community, securing worldly blessings, and realizing nirvana.



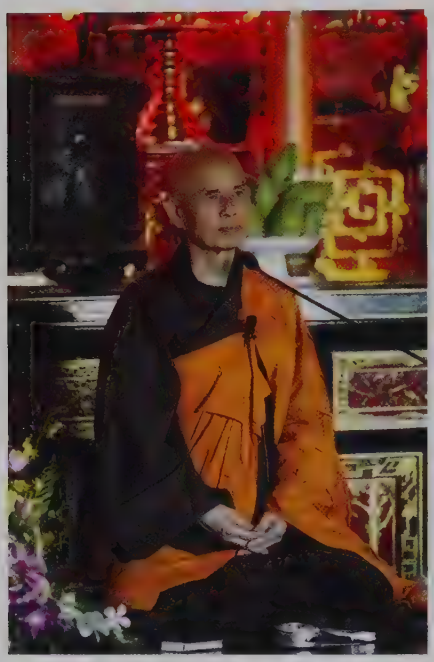
A monk rescues texts from a temple ruined by the 2004 tsunami.

# Encounter with Modernity: Socially "Engaged Buddhism"

Protesting the Vietnam War, a Vietnamese monk commits suicide.

In the aftermath of the devastating tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, killing over 250,000 people, images of lived Buddhism filled the media. Accounts of the first humanitarian responses reported that Buddhist householders immediately gathered medicines, bandages, clothes, and food and headed to coastal areas to help others. Those interviewed in Sri Lanka and Thailand explained that they were strengthened and motivated by their Buddhist tradition's teachings—that suffering is sad but inevitable in life, and that acting compassionately is a central duty. This unprecedented tragedy in 2004 showed how strong the adherence to basic Buddhist doctrines still is today.

Other images of Asian Buddhists are of monks confronting war. In 1991, the monk



Zen Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh in 2007, at the opening of a three-day requiem for those killed on both sides of the Vietnam War.

Ghosananda of Cambodia led other monks and householders into the countryside to intervene and end hostilities between Khmer Rouge fighters and the new government. Another image, from 1963, is that of a Vietnamese monk sitting cross-legged, engulfed in flames, his suicide a protest of the South Vietnamese government's failure to respect Buddhism and to adopt a policy of national reconciliation. Among the many Buddhist monks who challenged the corrupt South Vietnamese state was Thich Nhat Hanh, who argued that when faced with immense suffering, Buddhists must take action and engage their society.

Inspired by the monks of Vietnam, contemporary Buddhist activists in Asia and in the West are responding to crises posed by environmental despoliation, political corruption, and global hunger. In Asia, these profound changes have disrupted the regions' rural societies, including many of the communities that have long sustained Buddhist monastic institutions. **Engaged Buddhism** refuses to turn away from suffering, counseling instead "mundane awakening." In this way, engaged Buddhists hope to elicit compassion on the part of individuals, villages, countries, and eventually, all people, arguing that engagement is as fundamental to Buddhism as the ascetic and solitary practices of the spiritual elite. Especially in urban centers, engaged Buddhists promote new understandings of Buddhism and organize Buddhist action, often confronting politicians and corporations. Can this movement revitalize the tradition from the capitals to the rural hinterlands and mitigate suffering without reducing or compromising its principal values?

**engaged Buddhism:** reformist movement among global Buddhists seeking to relate the teachings to contemporary suffering

## Premodern Buddhism: The Formative Era (600 BCE–100 CE)

To understand this concept of "engagement," it is essential to go back to the beginning of the Buddhist tradition. Since it is the Buddha who guides all followers and inspires all the later schools, we first learn about the life of Buddhism's founder and examine his fundamental teachings. And because the historical destiny of Buddhism, the world's first missionary religion, is centered on the 2,500-year journey of the monastic community, understanding this institution's origins and development is essential to understanding the faith's expansion across Asia and the West.

### The Buddha: Context and Biography

We saw in Chapter 6 that North India during the Buddha's lifetime (563–483 BCE) was a place of spiritual questioning and ascetic searching. The dominant Aryan society

was evolving from small, pastoral settlements to city-states and a more diverse economy. In the context of this transformation, the old, sacrifice-centered Vedic religion controlled by members of the brahmin caste was becoming less plausible for some as an explanation of humanity's connection to the universe. In remote retreats and near the emerging urban centers, seekers called ***shramanas*** pursued ascetic practices (yoga) to realize the true essence of human consciousness, life, and reality. The society in which the Buddha was born was ordered by caste and brahmin ritualism. In addition, however, there were nonconformist shramana seekers who questioned almost everything the old Vedic tradition asserted about spirit, morality, and social hierarchy. Some explored various trance states, living as simply and with as little food as possible, while other ascetics advocated materialism, nihilism, agnosticism, or fatalism.

**shramanas:** wandering ascetics; a term applied to Buddhists, Jains, and others

Like the Upanishadic seers, most shramanas believed that life consists of a countless series of rebirths, that these rebirths are determined by an individual's karma (a natural and moral causal force that accrues from one's deeds), and that rebirths continue until one "burns off" one's past karma to reach a state of liberation. In Buddhism, this state of liberation is termed ***nirvana.*** The most famous man ever to become an ascetic sought out these shramanas and learned from them, adopting many of their spiritual practices and doctrines. This man, who would later call himself a Buddha, started out life in very different circumstances.

**nirvana:** blissful state of liberation from rebirth, defined by the extinction of karma

Early accounts of the Buddha's life were passed down orally. What survives today are a variety of ancient accounts. While key events are largely the same across these accounts, specific incidents and thematic emphases greatly differ. What follows here draws on the commonalities of ancient accounts, as well as more recent vernacular biographies.

## *Siddhartha's Early Life*

Siddhartha, the man who was to become the Buddha, was born a prince, the son of warrior-caste parents who ruled a small state in the Himalayan foothills. According to legendary accounts, this boy's birth was accompanied by auspicious celestial signs and a wise man's prediction that the child would be successful as either a universal monarch or a great ascetic. The name *Siddhartha* means "the one who attains the goal." The boy, whose mother died a week after giving birth, grew up in a palace where his father did everything in his power to ensure his son's destiny to become a ruler. The son trained in the martial arts and was indulged with all the pleasures of rule, including marriage, a harem of concubines, and every form of pleasant artistic distraction.

Siddhartha's life changed when he followed his faithful chariot driver to see the world beyond the palace walls. All the textual legends describe the profound impact of seeing a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and a shramana. These "four passing sights" overturned Siddhartha's carefree assumptions about life. They also offered a vision of the ascetic path he could take to escape the spiritual emptiness he now felt in his sheltered existence. Within days, Siddhartha abandoned his palace and family, including a newborn son, and began his search for a teacher among the forest-dwelling ascetics. The legends state that he was twenty-nine years old.

Map 7.1 The spread of Buddhism.

### *Siddhartha Begins His Quest*

Siddhartha found a shramana guru whose way of meditation allowed one to achieve a "state of nothingness." Siddhartha soon mastered this technique, but he also recognized that the accomplishment was limited in value. His quest then led to a second teacher, who taught a method of attaining trances that brought an experience of "neither perception nor nonperception." But again, Siddhartha found that his mastery of this technique still left him short of the highest goal.

He soon joined five other men, who vowed to explore together a rigorous ascetic practice involving fasting (down to a few rice grains daily), breath control, and long periods seated in unmoving meditation. He adopted this lifestyle for about five years but finally rejected it, also, as too extreme. His fellow seekers, dismayed, ridiculed and abandoned him. But through this experiment, Siddhartha came to understand that the spiritual life is best undertaken as a middle path between the extremes of sensory indulgence (the life in the palace) and asceticism so zealous that it weakens the body. One name for Buddhism, "the Middle Way," stems from this insight.

The Buddha's bath after his birth, depicted in a Chinese sculpture.

Despite these setbacks, Siddhartha did not quit. Buoyed by a gift of rice and barley gruel from a village woman, he came to sit beneath a great ficus tree by a river outside the town of Gaya. He vowed to find either success or death in his quest. The legends relate that his revitalized meditations were disturbed by Mara, a supernatural being regarded by Buddhists as the personification of death, delusion, and temptation. Mara summoned his demons, who appeared as armed soldiers to elicit fear and as alluring females to provoke lust. Siddhartha touched his right hand to the earth, asking it to bear witness to his merit and eventual success. This earth-touching gesture, seen often in depictions of the Buddha, brought forth earthquakes and a cooling stream that washed away Mara and his hordes.

### *The Bodhi Tree and the Deer Park*

Later that same night, after resuming his meditations, Siddhartha reached increasingly subtle and blissful perceptions. He even attained such powers as memory of former lives and psychic vision, which allowed him to survey the destinies of all beings according to their karma, as well as the powers of levitation, telepathy, and greatly enhanced vision and hearing. Finally. he completely extinguished all desire and ignorance by fully realizing his capacity for insight (***prajna***). This "awakening" to the nature of reality under the *bo* (for *bodhi*, "enlightenment") tree, poetically recounted as occurring at daybreak.

**prajna:** "insight" or "wisdom"; quality of mind discerning reality clearly and calmly, its completeness necessary for enlightenment

The Buddha encountering the "four passing sights" that inspired his religious quest and eventual awakening.

provides the root meaning of the term *Buddha* that from this moment onward we can properly apply to Siddhartha. He is also referred to as *Gautama Buddha*, using his family surname, and *Shakyamuni*, "the sage," or *muni*, from Gautama's clan, the Shakyas.

For seven weeks, the Buddha remained near the bodhi tree, enjoying the bliss of nirvana. The texts recount a story that his very first disciples were householders, merchants who made offerings and received his benediction for their continued worldly success. He also received the veneration of *nagas*, the snake deities, whose submission symbolized Buddhism's claim of "spiritual conquest" over all deities everywhere. Then, troublesome Mara returned to tempt the Buddha to remain isolated, enjoying his solitary nirvana. In his attempt to prevent the Buddha from continuing to teach, Mara cited humanity's hopeless stupidity. But the high gods also intervened to request that the Buddha live on to share his doctrine because, they assured him, there were people everywhere capable of realizing **enlightenment** by means of his teachings, or **Dharma**. This request inspired the Buddha's compassion, and he vowed to stay in the world, thus providing the ultimate model of the engaged Buddhist.

The Buddha then walked for days to a deer park outside the city of Varanasi, where he found his former ascetic colleagues who had abandoned him. Their disdain when he broke his fast turned to awe, however, after the Buddha taught for the first time the Four Noble Truths, which culminate in the Eightfold Path. The five ascetics became the first members of the ***sangha***, and they were instructed to travel for the purpose of sharing the Dharma with all people of the world.

## *The Buddha's Life Work*

**enlightenment:** state of "nirvana" or liberation

**Dharma:** teachings of the Buddha

**sangha:** Buddhist monastic community

**arhats:** enlightened beings; term applied to the Buddha and his disciples

For the next forty or so years, the Buddha empowered his enlightened disciples, called ***arhats***, to act on his behalf, admit qualified seekers into the sangha, guide those who wished to meditate, and teach the Dharma to any who would hear it. Shakyamuni converted other ascetics, sometimes whole assemblies of them, as well as solitary shramanas, householders, and rulers. The Buddha's faculty of psychic knowledge allowed him to preach according to the exact capacity of his audience.

As the Buddhist movement grew, new situations arose that required adaptation. In addition to his skill at teaching, the Buddha created a new religious institution in

This Nepalese sculpture shows the Buddha in an earth-touching gesture, a frequently encountered icon that alludes to his calling upon the earth to bear witness to his fitness for enlightenment.

ancient India: the sangha of monks (***bhikshu***). It was established on the basis of formal ordination and vows to follow the extensive set of rules that the Buddha adapted to the many environments where Buddhist monks came to live.

***bhikshu:*** Buddhist monk

After much urging (at least according to some legends), Shakyamuni also gave permission, around 510 BCE, for the creation of a sangha for female renunciants. He also bequeathed a mixed message by emphasizing that while women are capable of realizing enlightenment, the nuns (***bhikshuni***) must subordinate themselves to the monks in authority and in matters of social etiquette. When admitting nuns, the Buddha

***bhikshuni:*** Buddhist nun

also predicted that the tradition would decline. In subsequently allowing the sangha to receive lands, buildings, and other donated communal resources, the Buddha also established a framework in which the sangha shifted its focus over time, from wandering to settled cooperative communal existence. This development, which gave householder disciples a fixed focus for their patronage, in turn strengthened the sangha.

**stupas:** Buddhist shrines containing the relics of a Buddha or enlightened saint

Late in life, the Buddha began to suffer from various ailments, and he died in Kushinagar at the age of eighty. His body was cremated, and the remains, divided into eight portions, were entombed in relic mound shrines (***stupas***) that became the focus of Buddhist ritual and the architectural representation of the Buddha's presence across the world.

Shakyamuni's life story became for Buddhists a paradigmatic example of an individual's quest for enlightenment, and his exemplary role for subsequent generations was elaborated in hundreds of stories that describe incidents from this life as well as from his previous incarnations, in which he was reborn as a human, animal, or spirit. These narratives, along with stories of his path to Buddhahood, inspired art and literature across Asia. The Buddha embodies the Dharma, which, as in Hindu practice, is understood to comprise both the ultimate truth and the teachings that lead to that truth.

## Buddhism as the Path to Nirvana

The spiritual tradition we refer to as *Buddhism* arose from the Buddha's wish to help others realize nirvana. The Buddha emphasized the practical, goal-directed orientation of his way and urged his disciples not to engage in idle speculation or mere intellectualism. He taught that humanity comprises persons of different kinds who each have different forms of karma. According to whether they are "ordinary persons," "learners," or "adepts," each is to be instructed differently. Regardless of an individual's level, to be born as a human at all, instead of as an animal or divinity, is a rare opportunity. A human life is not to be wasted; rather, people should live with purpose, with an awareness of the reality of karma, and make efforts to get closer to the highest goal, nirvana.

Unlike the other world religions, Buddhism has but a few universally accepted doctrines. Beyond the three refuges cited at the beginning of this chapter, Buddhists have adopted varying subsets of the Buddha's teachings and rituals, always keeping the monastic community (the sangha) as its central institution. How could a world religion accommodate such pluralism in the course of establishing its essential doctrines? First, Buddhists (like Hindus) assume that since humanity contains persons of many sorts, many different spiritual avenues are needed to reach everyone. Therefore, teachers formulated myriad practices, and philosophers offered multiple interpretations of the truth the Buddha had revealed.

The second reason for Buddhism's pluralism lies in an instruction from the Buddha himself: After his death, no one person or institution was to be allowed to fix a single canon or set a single norm of orthodoxy in doctrinal interpretations. As a result, by 600 years after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha, several different canons of collected teachings had been made, and the sangha aligned under two main divisions: the "elder

The earliest Sanchi stupa with gateway and pathway for ritual circumambulation. This hilltop center in Madhya Pradesh state, central India, was a major Buddhist pilgrimage site in ancient India.

traditionalists" and the Great Vehicle. The elders, or **Sthaviravadins**, in South Asia were more numerous, and their sole surviving school is called *Theravada*. About 100 CE, the Theravadins collected their scriptures in the **Pali Canon**, and have taught that humanity should aspire to become enlightened arhats. *Mahayana* is the name given to the Great Vehicle division, and many schools survive today, including Pure Land and Zen, each with a great diversity of subgroups. Thus, in many respects, it is quite artificial to posit a single "Buddhism" based on a common code or single text. Buddhism in popular practice among the laity, however, does show many continuities, as we will see.

**Sthaviravadins:** traditionalists among early Buddhist monastic schools

**Pali Canon:** The Theravada Canon written in the Pali language (derived from Sanskrit)

## *Nirvana*

The first topic we will discuss is the highest ideal—nirvana. The word *nirvana* is based on the Sanskrit verb meaning "to cool by blowing." It refers to the blissful state entered by those who have "cooled" the fevers of greed, hatred, and delusion. These three things inflame desire, create karma, and bind the individual into ***samsara***, the world of rebirth and suffering. Buddhists often present the concept of

**samsara:** the world of rebirth subject to the law of karma and the inevitability of death

"The Buddha declares the Law with a single voice, while sentient beings, each in their own way, construe the meaning."

—*Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra*

nirvana realization by likening it to the extinction of a fire, for as this phenomenon was understood in ancient India, the flames of an extinguished fire had been released to return to a diffuse and eternal state. The state of nirvana thus carries similar associations: freedom and existence in an eternal state beyond all material description. Both men and women, by moral living and mastering meditation, can realize nirvana through the cultivation of prajna, the direct "insight" into the nature of existence.

## *The Four Noble Truths*

**Four Noble Truths:** primary doctrinal formula describing human life as marked by suffering, distorted by desire, and a path to its extinction

Buddha's earliest teaching, the **Four Noble Truths**, provides an analysis of the human condition as well as a diagnosis: the path toward nirvana. The biographies of Shakyamuni recount that through the realization of these truths in his own experience, the Buddha reached final enlightenment.

The first Noble Truth, "All life entails suffering (or dissatisfaction)," instructs the Buddhist not to deny disease, loss of loved ones, old age, and death. The intention of this first truth is to encourage clear, realistic observation; life will never be free of dissatisfaction. Even good times are inadequate because they are only temporary. The appropriate response to this truth is to make the most of the spiritual opportunities of human birth and to show compassion (***karuna***) and loving-kindness (***maitri***) to alleviate the suffering affecting all other beings.

**karuna:** "compassion," the principal Buddhist social virtue

**maitri:** "loving-kindness," a Buddhist ethical virtue

The second Noble Truth states, "The cause of suffering is desire." This "desire" includes possessions, power, sex, and all that human beings "thirst after." (At the advanced stages of Buddhist practice, desire for doctrinal learning and even the wish for one's own enlightenment must also be rejected to reach the final goal.) The emphasis on desire in the second truth makes plain the need for renunciation, detachment, and asceticism.

The third Noble Truth, "Removing desire removes suffering," is rooted in the central Buddhist idea that the same pattern of cyclical cause and effect by which desire leads to further suffering can be reversed and, eventually, extinguished in nirvana. The emphasis on ending desire also highlights the importance of the sangha as a refuge for individuals who wish to remove themselves from the world of desire.

"Compared with the man who conquers thousands in battle, the greatest warrior is the man who conquers himself. . . . If a man is strenuous, thoughtful, self-controlled, and morally disciplined, he grows immensely."

—*Dhammapada, chapter 2*

The fourth Noble Truth, "The way for removing desire is to follow the Eightfold Path," specifies the Buddha's treatment that will "cure" the human condition, with its continuous cycle of rebirth, suffering, and death. As a Buddhist progresses toward enlightenment, moving through moral practice, meditation, and the cultivation of the prajna, an understanding of the Four Noble Truths deepens.

## *The Eightfold Path*

**Eightfold Path:** the eight qualities needed to realize nirvana

There are eight specific elements in the progressive path to nirvana. The **Eightfold Path** outlines the necessary means for achieving the realization of nirvana:

1. *Right Views*, especially of the Noble Truths, thoughts shaped by detachment from hatred and cruelty
2. *Right Intentions*, staying committed to final realization
3. *Right Speech*, which refrains from falsehood, gossip, and frivolity

## Basic Buddhist Formula: Buddhist Spiritual Progress and the Eightfold Path

| ***MORALITY*** | → | ***MEDITATION*** | → | ***PRAJNA*** | → | ***NIRVANA*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Right speech | → | Right mindfulness | → | Right views | | |
| Right action | → | Right concentration | → | Right intentions | | |
| Right livelihood | → | Right effort | | | | |
| Social context: 95% of community | | 5% | | 1% | | Exceedingly rare (being a "good Buddhist" for 95% of the community means living a moral life |

4. *Right Action*, defined as action free of killing, stealing, and harming
5. *Right Livelihood*, the refusal to earn a living through inflicting harm or killing
6. *Right Effort*, to clear and calm the mind
7. *Right Mindfulness*, the distinctive form of Buddhist meditation that observes clearly the mind and body and that cultivates detachment
8. *Right Concentration*, another form of advanced meditation that attains the mastery of trance states

Another important arrangement of the Eightfold Path was organized according to three central categories of Buddhist practice:

*Morality (Shila)* entails Speech, Action, and Livelihood
*Meditation (Dhyana)* entails Effort, Mindfulness, and Concentration
*Insight or Wisdom (Prajna)* entails Views and Thought

The Eightfold Path emphasizes that moral progress is the essential foundation to successful meditation, and that the measure of successful meditation is the awakening and deepening of prajna. The different elements of the path underscore Buddhism's emphasis on effectiveness in improving moral standards, practicing good conduct, promoting the material welfare of society, ridding oneself of desire, restructuring perceptions of the world, and ultimately, achieving enlightenment.

## The First Community and Its Development

Life in the Buddhist sangha was a true refuge for those who wished to live for spiritual purpose. Material needs of the sangha were met by householders, thus allowing the monks and nuns to meditate and study.

Texts regulating the early monks and nuns, called *Vinayas*, record how the rules of institutional life developed. For example, because the Buddha was sensitive to the state laws under which he lived, he declared criminals, runaway slaves, and army deserters ineligible to join the sangha. He also specified principles to govern the community and insisted that the sangha meet every two weeks, at which time each monk or nun certified his or her personal compliance. This fortnightly ritual became a central feature of life in the sangha. The Buddha's organizational genius can be seen as well in his cultivation of a householder community that provided for the needs of the sangha. It was Buddhist householders who joined the sangha, and it was the patronage of other good Buddhist householders that established the faith's monasteries and shrines across India and, over time, throughout Asia.

After the Buddha's death, in accordance with his instruction that authority over his community was not to reside in a single person or institution, the monks and nuns settled in separate colonies, which became the monastic centers that perpetuated the faith. They repeated and memorized the sets of sermons they had heard, and they worked out a distinctive form of communal life. Within the first three centuries, several councils of monks also met to focus on the exact rules of monastic practice.

Although the early sanghas found considerable common ground, none of the recorded councils ever achieved exact consensus on matters of discipline or doctrinal formulation. While dissenters practiced as they felt proper in their own monasteries, the monastic codes in the *Vinayas* are remarkably similar. Yet it was disagreements over surprisingly minor points that led to schisms. This early pattern of disciplinary autonomy and doctrinal divergence shaped the regional pluralism found across the Buddhist world right up to the present.

## How Buddhism Became a World Religion

**Ashoka:** ruler whose patronage spread Buddhist institutions and teachings across his empire, and likely beyond

In the first two centuries after Shakyamuni's death, Buddhist monks and converts spread slowly across India. At first, they were simply one of the many shramana groups that emphasized asceticism and rejected the brahmin caste's privileged status, its ritual system, and especially, its claim to hold a monopoly on advanced spiritual practice. It was **Ashoka** (r. 273–232 BCE), an emperor of the powerful Maurya dynasty, whose support encouraged Buddhism as a broad-based religious tradition that reached beyond the ascetics. Now, it was in a position to unify the social classes of Indic civilization and link the householder population with its monastic elite.

Ashoka, through his personal prestige and imperial edicts helped spread Buddhism across most of the Indian subcontinent. As a result, the first definite traces of Buddhist monasteries and stupa shrines can be dated to this era, as can the first systematic oral collections of the teachings. Within a century after the end of the Mauryan period, Buddhist institutions dotted the major trade routes leading from the Buddhist holy land, with major shrines, monasteries, and pilgrimage traditions developing at sites associated with the founder's life.

Buddha from Gandhara, in the upper Indus River region, where icons were made by artisans skilled in the Hellenistic style.

The expansion northwest into the upper Indus River region called **Gandhara** and into the Kashmir Valley and beyond into central Asia made these areas Buddhist strongholds for the next millennium. It was here that the Indic world had already met the Hellenic (Greek-influenced) world, for hundreds of settlements across the upper Indus were populated by descendants of the troops of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) who had established small states and, in some cases, became prominent regional traders. Many also converted to Buddhism. To understand Buddhism's successful rise to popularity among kings and commoners, however, we must comprehend how the sangha became the center of Buddhism across Asia.

**Gandhara:** area of Indo-Greek interaction, influential in the creation of Buddhist art

## Sangha and Monastery: The Institutional Vehicles of Buddhism's Expansion

As Buddhist monasticism spread across Asia, it introduced independent, corporate institutions that transformed local societies and regional polities. It was monasteries and shrines that rooted the faith in every locality. In ancient India, the early sangha admitted new members without regard to caste. And in Buddhism's subsequent missionary migrations, acceptance into the sangha offered ordinary citizens an opportunity for spiritual seeking and educational advancement that was otherwise unavailable.

Buddhism could not have existed in society at large without the support of the householders, for it was the laity that ensured the viability of the monastic institution. Throughout the Buddhist world, laypeople made donations to the sangha to "earn merit" as a means of improving their karma and garnering worldly blessings for

themselves, their families, and their communities. It was this central exchange, maintained between sangha and society, that kept Buddhism vibrant.

### *Varieties of Buddhist Monasticism*

The typical Buddhist community had its center in a monastery (*vihara*), where monks or nuns would take their communal vows, meditate, and study. Monks also practiced medicine, performed rituals essential to the Buddhist lifestyle of the locality, and served as vihara builders and groundskeepers. Over time, distinctions developed within Buddhist monasticism. At the forest monasteries, meditation and optional ascetic practices could be undertaken (often under the leadership of a charismatic monk teacher). Monasteries in villages and urban settlements offered the opportunity to blend compassionate service to the community with individual cultivation and study. A Buddhist monk or nun could move between forest villages and urban monasteries as well.

In many areas, the focus and inspiration for followers was a monk whose spiritual charisma and exemplary teaching ability drew monastic disciples and donations from the laity. The common biography of such monks mirrors that of the Buddha himself: disillusionments, renunciation, retreat to the wilderness, nirvana realization, and then a return to society to teach.

### *Practical Mechanisms of Expansion*

Many successful monasteries expanded. The pattern was to send out monks to establish satellite institutions following the teachings of the charismatic founder, thereby perpetuating the monastic lineage. This template of expansion extended Buddhism into unconverted zones. The resulting network of "mother–daughter" monasteries shaped alliances of all sorts, religious and otherwise, providing the pattern of new Buddhist institution building worldwide down to the present day. This institutional system also resulted in the tendency for aristocratic/dominant caste families to control local monastic lineages. Certain ethnic groups came to dominate Buddhism, and in some regions, their sanghas of "married monks" have been established for generations in specific regions of Buddhist Tibet, the Kathmandu Valley, Japan, and Sri Lanka. In other contexts, Buddhist viharas were instrumental in breaking down ethnic and class boundaries, blurring divisions between peoples, and creating transregional spiritual communities.

Rulers across Asia supported Buddhism because of its emphasis on individual morality, its rituals designed to secure prosperity for the state and the powerful legitimization that monastics could bestow on a regime. History has also shown that states favoring Buddhism often placed controls on the sangha's development. Buddhist exponents, in turn, held up Ashoka as a model for the ideal Buddhist ruler, who today would be called a benevolent dictator. Thus, leading monks in the sangha could offer those wielding political power the highest form of legitimation in the eyes of the faithful. In this manner, Buddhist doctrines, officials, and patrons permeated the secular and political lives of the societies Buddhism entered.

In places where Buddhism thrived, some monasteries in cities and villages evolved into complex institutions that were much more than simple refuges for ascetics.

The monastery often promoted literacy by housing the only local school. Many urban monasteries also became lending institutions, appointing treasurers to see that, when monies donated at shrines exceeded the sangha's requirements, the surplus was reinvested in the local community. On the trade routes especially, this practice, combined with profits from renting monastery-owned buildings to warehousing or retailing enterprises, garnered considerable income for the monastery treasuries. Such developments explain how Buddhism so often traveled across the Asian landscape on the basis of trade.

Another component in the spread of Buddhist institutions across Asia was the accumulation of lands donated by individuals and the state. Since monks were forbidden to farm, the sangha would rent out the cultivated lands it was acquiring. Whether its laborers grew rice and wheat or cultivated orchards, the monastery derived the food or cash needed for the sangha's upkeep. Until the twentieth century, in fact, many of the large Buddhist institutions had indentured workers who labored on their estates.

Buddhist monastery estate in ancient China. By the end of the first Buddhist millennium, major monasteries had become complex institutions whose wealth helped popularize the tradition.

Finally, shrines located within the monasteries would also earn income for the sangha in the form of offerings and from levies imposed on artisans who sold icons and votive amulets. All these elements made running a major monastery a demanding job and ensured that both donors and managers wielded considerable influence in the community.

These practices of "monastic landlordism," banking, and shrine management were also central to Buddhism's successful missions across Asia, creating the means to endow the faith with reliable income and a strong material culture. Buddhists attracted a following not only with their spiritual teachings but also with well-constructed, often-remarkable buildings, shrines, libraries, and image halls that complemented the Dharma. Many viharas also organized endowed charities that fed the poor and dispensed free medical care.

There was one problem, however. As a practical matter, monastery autonomy and the lack of an overarching authority to regulate the monks' and nuns' obedience to the *Vinaya* code made political leaders the arbiters of the integrity of Buddhist institutions. These officials had to "purify the sangha" periodically—that is, remove those who were acting contrary to the *Vinayas* or, perhaps, had not entered the vihara through the proper ordination. Thus, Buddhism's strength through concentrating wealth and human resources was also its historical weakness: Viharas were vulnerable to the variability of state patronage and royal protection as well as to the devastating effects of internal corruption and civil disorder.

# Premodern Buddhism: The Classical Era (100–800 CE)

## The Pan-Asian Expansion of Buddhism

From the beginning, Buddhism has been a missionary religion, its founder and monastic converts teaching a message directed to and thought suitable for all peoples. By the year 100 CE, Buddhism had entered China through central Asia on the silk routes. As it grew more popular and spread across East Asia during the next six centuries, monks and pilgrims traveled over land and later on oceanic routes between the two great ancient civilizations of Asia: India and China. The establishment of Buddhism across Asia constitutes one of the greatest instances of cross-cultural transmission and conversion in world history. Buddhism's original conceptions of space, time, psychology, and human destiny challenged indigenous notions. It also introduced a new social institution that fostered its missionary success: the land-grant monastery, whose members could be drawn from diverse social classes and live free from taxation, forced labor, or military service.

## The Core Doctrines

"Enlightened beings are like lotus flowers,
With roots of kindness, stems of peace,
Petals of wisdom,
Fragrance of moral conduct."

SOURCE: *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, trans. Thomas Cleary, from *Everyday Mind* (New York: Riverhead, 1997), page 87.

Scholars emphasize the division between traditionalists (Theravada) and adherents of the Great Vehicle (Mahayana), which grew among intellectuals in Buddhism's first millennium. But most householders, whose practice of Buddhism focused on moral living, merit-making, and securing worldly blessings, had little interest in such doctrinal complexities or philosophical differences. These householders were mainly concerned with the sangha's conformity to the *Vinaya* code because upright monks and nuns could be relied on for proper performance of rituals that benefited individuals and the community. In addition, householders would earn merit by making donations to the sangha itself.

From the earliest days, monks (or nuns) following very different interpretations of the Dharma coexisted under the same monastery roof. Here, we first consider doctrines and ethical norms that all Buddhists shared and then discuss teachings that differed from school to school.

### *Prajna and Realizing Nirvana*

**Three Marks of Existence:** Characteristics of reality central to the Buddhist analysis of human reality: suffering, impermanence, and no soul

Necessary for the attainment of nirvana, the term *prajna* refers to the capacity for deep spiritual discernment. In Buddhism, it means "seeing into" reality as it truly is—in other words, characterized by suffering, impermanence, and supporting the existence of those traits known as the **Three Marks of Existence**. Buddhist salvation is often referred to as "enlightenment" because prajna eliminates ignorance and completely clears the mind to see reality without distortion.

The state a Buddha or an arhat, a fully enlightened follower, achieves at death is referred to as "final nirvana." Nirvana has been described in both negative and positive terms: a deathless realm where there is neither sun nor moon, neither coming nor going, but also a state that is tranquil and pure. Most of the early scholastic treatises recognized nirvana as the only permanent reality in the cosmos. It is not to be seen as "annihilation," which is an extreme position rejected by the Buddha.

## *"Nonself" Doctrine*

The concept of ***anatman*** ("no-*atman*," or "no-self") is used to reject any notion of an essential, unchanging interior entity at the center of a person. The "atman" the Buddha rejected is the indestructible soul posited in the Upanishads and subsequent Hinduism, as described in Chapter 6. Buddhist philosophers argued that the universal characteristic of impermanence, one of the Three Marks of Existence, applies to human beings. As a result, they regarded the human "being" in terms of the continuously changing, interdependent relationship between the five aggregates, called ***skandhas***.

**anatman:** "no-atman"; the doctrine denying the reality of a permanent, immortal soul or ego at the center of a person

**skandhas:** "aggregates"; term used to identify each of the five main components that define a human being

Buddhists see the person as a collection of the skandhas: the physical body, which is made of combinations of the four elements (earth, water, fire, and air); feelings that arise from sensory contact; perceptions that attach the categories good, evil, and neutral to these sensory inputs; mental habits (*samskaras*) that connect karma-producing will to mental action; and the consciousness that arises when mind and body come in contact with the external world.

The spiritual purpose of breaking down this apparently unchanging individuality is to demonstrate that there is nothing (or "no thing") to be attached to or to direct one's desire toward. The no-self concept, however, presented Buddhist doctrine with the problem of moral causality: How can the doctrine of karma, with its emphasis on compensation for one's good and bad moral decisions, operate without the mechanism of the soul? The standard explanation given is that karma endures in samskaras that are impressed in the fifth skandha, consciousness. Although always evolving and therefore impermanent, one's consciousness escapes the body at death and is reincarnated in the next life form.

While the no-self or no-soul doctrine was at the center of Buddhist thought for the philosophical elite, householders across Asia still typically conceived of themselves in terms of a body and a soul. This contradiction may indicate how unimportant some philosophical doctrines were to the mainstream of popular Buddhist understanding.

## *Impermanence and Interdependence*

**dependent origination:** twelve-part formula explaining how individuals are bound to future rebirth until they extirpate desire and ignorance

Another universally accepted doctrinal formula in Buddhism is one that specifies the patterns of psychic and bodily states conditioning (i.e., causing) a person's bondage to suffering and rebirth. Known as **dependent** (or *conditioned*) **origination**, this doctrine views reality as ongoing, impermanent, and interdependent, and it visualizes

## RITUALS AND RITES: Buddhist Meditation

### Then: Tradition of Monastery Meditation

Until about 150 years ago, Buddhist meditation was undertaken only by monastics, and even then was a regular practice only for a minority of this small elite. In ancient India, monks and nuns had varying approaches to this spiritual practice: some were more inclined toward textual memorization, rituals, or teaching, while others served as managers and builders of the institution's properties. Those interested in meditation worked with a spiritual mentor, from whom instructions in a specific practice was obtained and with whom reports of progress and obstacles would be shared. The meditating monk or nun might practice in a monastery training hall, in his or her own cell, or in an isolated retreat. Some teachers even instructed their disciples that all activities in daily life could be times of meditation. The traditional Buddhist meditation master would try to discern the state of a disciple's spiritual aptitude (prajna), mainly by interpreting the individual's body, speech, and mind; this caring, personal interaction provided the basis for determining how best the individual could move forward. Meditation, in short, relied on the communal support of the monastery. Yet despite this variety of approaches, all were directed to the universal goals: calming the mind and discerning the real.

### Now: Online Meditation Guided by Cybermonks

The Buddhist tradition's openness to cultural adaptation continues into the present. Another profound

reality as a circle divided into twelve parts (Figure 7.1). Whatever point of entry you take on this circle, the next clockwise element is the experience conditioned, and the adjacent element in the counterclockwise position is that condition directly affecting the present. Without spiritual exertion, we spin around, life after life, under these conditioning patterns. Used in this way, the twelve-fold formula reiterates the basic doctrines already cited: Craving and ignorance are the two chief causes of suffering (Noble Truths Two and Three), and the human being has no soul, only changing components of bodily life units (skandhas). This complicated formula can also be reduced to two key elements of Buddhism: the interaction of desire and ignorance that keeps humans being reborn in samsara.

### *Buddhist Moral Precepts*

The early Buddhists specified that moral practice is the first foundation for moving toward nirvana. Buddhist ethics involves an "ideology of merit," in which making good karma and avoiding bad karma is the only sensible approach to life. Popular Buddhist stories focus on the reality of rebirth, covering thousands of lifetimes, which leads to the realization that all contemporary beings have been one's own parents and children throughout a vast number of rebirths. Thus, it is both natural and logical to

innovation in Buddhist modernism across Asia has been the democratization of meditation, and its spread to householders. Monks, who have always had the role of teachers and scholars, are becoming increasingly computer literate, and so it is the "cybermonk" who is experimenting today with freeing meditation from the monastery halls. To meet the needs of householders in the West who may be too far from a monastery to practice meditation in a community, contemporary monasteries and institutions now utilize the internet to foster practice. One example is the Zen Mountain Monastery, in Woodstock, New York. Since 2003, this monastery has posted meditation instructions and a link where distant meditators can contact Cybermonk, "a senior monastic available through e-mail to answer your Dharma questions." While it is uncertain how well these initiatives can actually succeed without the face-to-face guidance of a living teacher, there is no doubt that Buddhist leaders today are embracing social media to pursue missionary outreach. As one cybermonk from Australia, Phra Pannyavaro, has written, "The new 'cyber temple' will become the meeting place for an online Buddhist community of *practitioners*. . . . There is a belief in some Buddhist traditions of a future Buddha, called Maitreya—who it is said will come to revitalize the Dhamma [Dharma]. I cannot honestly see how any future Buddha, or future followers of the historical Buddha, would not naturally use the available technology and be quite at ease surfing the Internet."[1]

act morally toward all beings. Buddhist doctrine also emphasizes the wisdom of cultivating detachment, discernment, and compassion (karuna).

The earliest moral rules the Buddha established consisted of five precepts. In South Asian and Southeast Asia, they are chanted regularly in modern Theravada rituals by both monks and laity. In these communities, the precepts are regarded as general ideals applicable to everyone. Mahayana schools tended to regard the precepts more as vows, to be chanted only if one intends to follow them completely. (One

## Basic Buddhist Formula: "Calm the Mind, Discern the Real"

[remedy: renunciation/detachment]

[remedy: meditation → prajna]

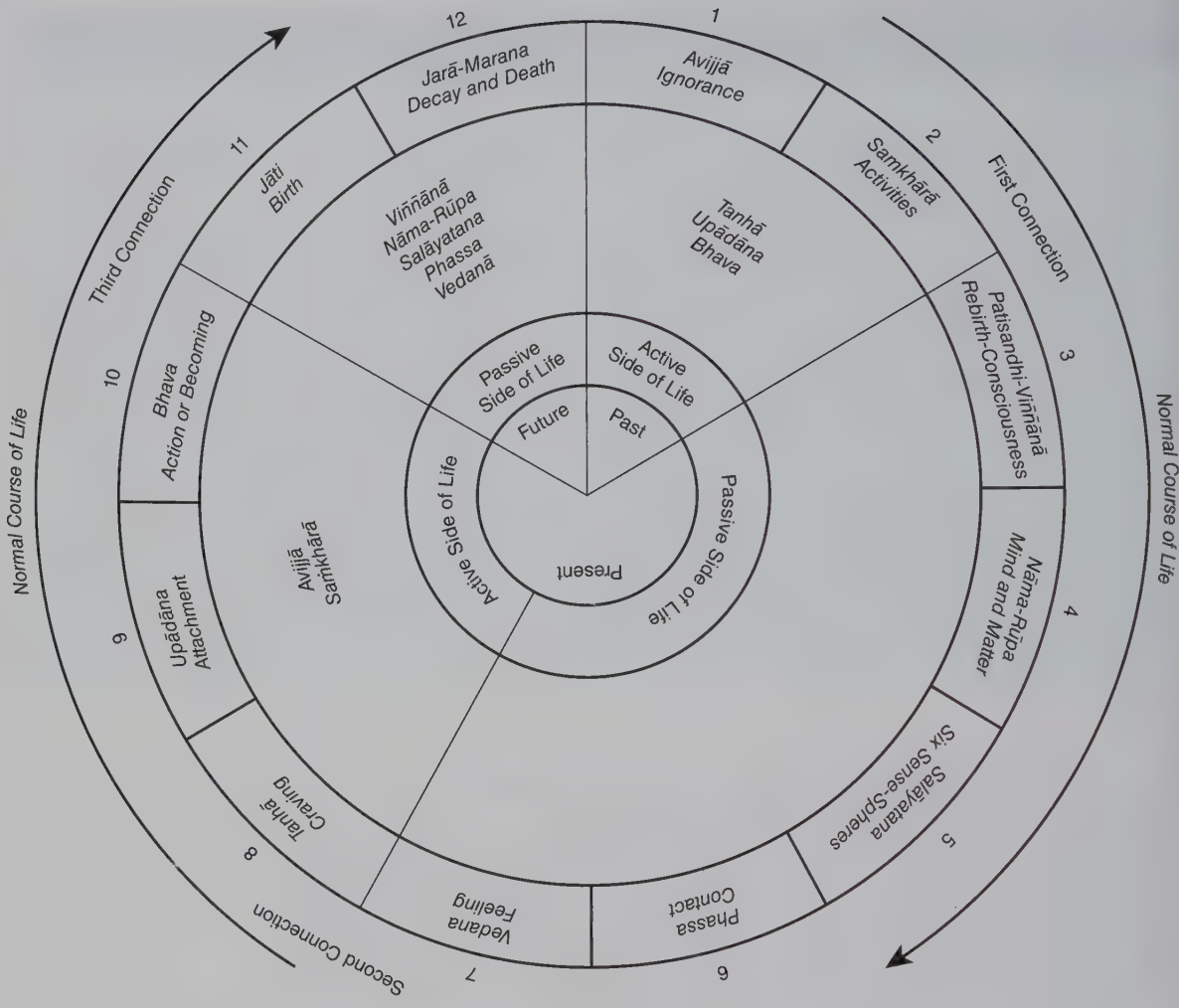



Figure 7.1 Diagram representing the formula of dependent origination, including several interpretive schemes.

can omit reciting a precept if one does not expect to be able to observe it.) The five precepts listed here are paired with corresponding positive traits that can be developed to counteract the inclination to violate a precept:

1. Not to destroy life intentionally → kindness and compassion
2. Not to steal/take what is not given → generosity and renunciation
3. Not to have sexual misconduct → seeking "joyous satisfaction with one's spouse"
4. Not to lie → loving the truth, seeking it, pursuing discernment and insight
5. Not to become intoxicated → mindfulness, contentment, awareness via meditation

Later in the history of Buddhism, householders began to observe eight precepts on holy days, involving a stricter observance of the original five along with three additional renunciations:

6. Not to eat (solid) food after noon
7. Not to view shows, dancing, or singing or to wear garlands, perfumes, or jewelry
8. Not to sleep on high or wide beds.

In addition to the eight precepts, there is a set of ten precepts, observed by novice monks and undertaken as a long-term commitment. They comprise the eight but split one of these into two parts and add a final prohibition against handling money. This final rule was made to ensure that begging for food would be the norm for monks and nuns, an exchange between laity and sangha that bound together the Buddhist community.

## *Karma and Causality*

Karma doctrine should not be seen as only weakly fatalistic, as it does determine the form of rebirth. But since one is continually making new ***punya*** ("merit") or ***pap*** ("demerit"), this changes the ongoing outcome of karmic destiny. Buddhist karma analysis holds that some good actions (e.g., building a monastery) and bad actions (e.g., harming one's parents) lead to powerful repercussions in the future, in either this life or the next. Nevertheless, the larger reality is that a person's karma, like all phenomena, changes every instant.

**punya:** "merit"; good karma earned by moral practices, learning, and meditation

**pap:** "demerit"; bad karma earned by breaking the precepts

Further, the Buddhist understanding of causality is that not all occurrences in life are karma dependent. In fact, events are more likely than not to have had causes other than karma. Since only Buddhas can ascertain whether karma or something else is at work in ongoing life, individuals are faced with uncertainty in evaluating events. Buddhists make a "general reading" of karma from the traits discerned at birth (e.g., family status and those on the body). To be prepared for the future, however, the logic of the karma doctrine has motivated Buddhists everywhere to cultivate a lifelong practice of making punya and seeking guidance throughout life from astrology. Indeed, texts for householders emphasize that accumulation of wealth is the fruition of good past karma, and that giving away wealth to earn merit is the best human expenditure. This giving, of benefit to all, is in a sense the social application of the Buddha's teaching about interdependence. These principles have been incorporated into the teaching of **Four Conditions** and **Four Good Deeds**, doctrinal statements that have been as influential for the laity as the Four Noble Truths were for monks and philosophers:

**Four Conditions:** doctrinal formula specifying the rewards for moral living and merit making

**Four Good Deeds:** doctrinal formula guiding the laity on the uses of wealth

Four Conditions (to seek through Merit-making):

Wealth gotten by lawful means
Good renown in society
Long life
Birth in heaven

Four Good Deeds (to Use Wealth for):

Make family and friends happy
Ensure security against worldly dangers
Make offerings to family, friends, gods, and ghosts
Support worthy religious people

The core doctrines we have discussed—prajna and nirvana, anatman (no-soul), impermanence and interdependence, and karma causality—comprise the most common foundation for Buddhist belief. For householders, these ideas translate into fostering family ties, striving for economic success, making offerings to hungry ghosts and local gods, pursuing worldly happiness and security, nurturing faith, and seeking heaven.

Next, we consider how in specific places and times individual Buddhists and Buddhist communities have focused on these teachings that affect individual life.

## The Classical Ideal: Buddhist Civilization

Buddhist civilization was sustained by ritual exchanges between householders and renunciants, the monks and nuns who had abandoned worldly comforts. Many formulations of proper Buddhist practice were made in the course of early Buddhist history to guide the faithful among the spiritual alternatives specified by the Buddha. The triad of moral practice (*shila*), meditation (*dhyana*), and insight cultivation (prajna) was an early organizing schema, as we noted in our discussion of the Eightfold Path.

Buddhist monasticism arose to provide refuge and support for renunciants seeking enlightenment, but the tradition survived through relationships with lay followers who provided for the monks' and nuns' subsistence. Drawing on the loyalty of a cross section of all classes, Buddhists laid the foundations for a society with spiritual and moral dimensions. Buddhism adapted to myriad local traditions, yet its community remained focused on the **Three Refuges**: the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings), and the sangha (the monastic community).

**Three Refuges:** the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha

The general ideals of Buddhist civilization were in place very early. Monks and nuns served the world through their example of renunciation and meditation, by performing rituals, and by providing medical services. As preservers, transmitters, and exemplars of the Dharma, the sangha's duty was to attract the lay community's merit-making donations by being spiritually worthy; complementing this, sangha members were to follow the *Vinaya* rules and seek out sympathizers and donors. Based on these guidelines, Buddhist societies came to exhibit common traits: relic shrines as centers of community ritual and economy; monasteries as centers for meditation, study, and access to material resources; and sangha members who assumed leadership of the community's spiritual instruction and ritual life.

Thus, Buddhism successfully developed a broad vision of the spiritual community and of proper practice. The devout layperson's duty is to help others grow in faith, morality, knowledge, and charity; to live a life worthy of his or her family heritage;

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Teachings on Compassionate Living

Given that the First Noble Truth holds that "all life is suffering," then it follows that all Buddhists should do whatever possible to alleviate it and should open their hearts to others. This underlies the universal Buddhist moral emphasis on compassion.

Thus as a mother with her life will guard her son,
her only child, let him extend unboundedly his heart
to every living being. And so with loving-kindness
for all the world, let him extend unboundedly his
heart, above, below, around, unchecked, with no ill
will or hate.

—The Buddha[2]

In everything you do, simply work at developing love and compassion until they become a fundamental part of you. That will serve the purpose, even if you do not practice the more outward and conspicuous forms of Dharma, such as chanting, virtuous activities, and altruistic works. As a Sutra states, "Let those who desire Buddhahood not train in many Teachings but only one. Which one? Great Compassion. Those with great compassion possess all the Buddha's teaching as if it were in the palm of the hand."

—Tibetan monk and teacher
Patrul Rimpoche (1808–1887)[3]

and to make offerings to the spirits of the dead. The Buddha also revealed short texts (called *mantras*) that, when chanted, help householders achieve material blessings and protections. Given the variety of possible practices, the only sound definition of a "good Buddhist" is simple: one who takes refuge in the Three Jewels and practices according to one's spiritual capability.

## The Mahayana: Philosophies and East Asian Monastic Schools

Mahayana philosophers and followers were a minority in ancient South Asia, for monks of this persuasion lived in monasteries alongside Sthaviravadins, the predecessors of today's Theravadins. Mahayana only became the "Great Vehicle," the dominant form of Buddhism and the center of a vibrant subculture, in the last era of Buddhism in India (700 CE until its extinction) as well as in Burma, and in the Khmer, Indonesian, and Funan regions of medieval Southeast Asia until around 1300 CE.

The contrast between traditionalists (Theravadins) and Mahayanists seems to reflect a universal human tendency to divide religious communities between those inclined to a literal, conservative approach and those inclined to a more open-ended, experimental approach to spiritual matters. The Mahayana in this light might be compared to the Sufis in Islam, who are opposed to the strict scholars of the law (*ulama*); the Christian analogy would be the mystics in opposition to the official medieval church.

We shall discuss the Madhyamaka and "Consciousness Only" schools of Mahayana thought (as well as some minority schools that happen to be well known today) and a tradition called the Thunderbolt Vehicle.

### *The Madhyamaka*

Among the earliest texts expressing Mahayana ideas are those called the *Prajnaparamita* (*Perfection of Wisdom*). In these texts, comments attributed to the Buddha or notable monks deride the Theravadin arhats and seek to undermine their scholasticism. More importantly, however, the *Prajnaparamita* texts represent a search for the ultimate truth behind the words of the oldest Buddhist scriptures. Since Mahayana thought emphasizes interdependence, its exponents saw the Theravadins' focus on an individual's pursuit of nirvana as "selfish" and therefore ignorant of the Buddha's highest teaching. Most Mahayana exponents held that the laity as well as monks could potentially attain enlightenment.

**Nagarjuna:** influential analytical philosopher of the Mahayana school

**Madhyamaka:** Mahayana philosophical school whose goal is to clear away all attachments, making realization possible

Opposition to the Theravadins coalesced in the writings of the monk **Nagarjuna** (born ca. 150 CE), one of India's greatest philosophers and founder of the **Madhyamaka** school. The Theravada school believed that one could analyze phenomena in order to recognize their impermanence and nonselfhood. But Nagarjuna argued that this would mean phenomena had actual essences of their own. Instead, if one were to take the Buddha's teaching fully seriously, one had to conclude that phenomena are not actual in and of themselves. And any conceptualization of them as though they are is central to our delusion.

Nagarjuna developed a method that reduces all assertions to arbitrary propositions. He argued that all language is conventional, and that all classifications set up by language are mere constructions. In other words, language is "samsaric"; using it uncritically to understand reality inevitably warps the mind with samsara's desires and ignorance. In one of the most courageous explorations in the history of religions, even Buddhist terms like *nirvana* and *samsara*, Nagarjuna argued, are mere words. It is through understanding how humans construct reality arbitrarily, positing a "self" and then a "world of things" separate from it, that one reaches a core realization that reality is empty, or ***shunya***, of any "thing" the mind can construe. Through this insight, one can "see into" all illusions and desires, become free from attachments, and find release from the cycle of rebirths. Nagarjuna's aim was to clear away all false assumptions and even the subtle attachment to language and scholastic categories, thus opening the way to Buddhist meditation practices that transcend words in order to reach true refuge and final enlightenment.

**shunya:** "zero"; the term used to designate the emptiness ("*shunyata*") of all constructs

### *"Consciousness Only" School*

**Cittamatra:** Mahayana philosophical school that focuses on consciousness as the center of spiritual realization

The other major school of Mahayana thought continued to develop the Great Vehicle from Nagarjuna's standpoint. The "Consciousness Only" (**Cittamatra**) school largely agreed with the Madhyamaka view of experience as empty but asserted that spiritual transformation can therefore be achieved within human consciousness. This school's great thinkers were the brothers Asanga and Vasubandhu (active ca. 380 CE), who developed theories of consciousness and causality. They described how karma works within the stream of consciousness, where past actions may block pure, passionless seeing. Further, the spiritual life must be devoted to purifying mind or consciousness, since this is all that truly exists. Again, the practical effect of such theories was to promote the traditional Buddhist practice of meditation, as indicated by another name often applied to this faction: the *Yogacara*, or "yoga practice," school.

Manjushri, the bodhisattva of scholars, who holds a lotus containing a *Prajnaparamita* text in one hand, and in the other a sword symbolizing the prajna that cuts through ignorance and delusion.

### *Buddha-Nature School*

Another Mahayana philosophy emerged in East Asia: the **Buddha-nature** (*tathagatagarbha*) **school**. Its proponents held that if nirvana and samsara cannot be separated in any meaningful way, then nirvana must interpenetrate all reality. And if this is so, then one might say that all beings have a portion of nirvana, or the seed of Buddha-realization, and so possess the potential for enlightenment. Even the tiniest thing, they believed, contains the mystery of the universe. Although support for a school centered on this doctrine eventually declined in China, its ideas and metaphors influenced a Mahayana tradition in East Asia called *Ch'an* in China, *Sŏn* in Korea, and *Zen* in Japan.

### *The Lotus Sutra and Celestial Bodhisattvas*

One of the most popular Buddhist scriptures in East Asia was the ***Lotus Sutra***. Originally written in Sanskrit by 100 CE, the *Lotus Sutra* develops the Mahayana doctrine of cosmic Buddhahood through parables, accounts of astounding magical display, and hammering polemics. It describes how the Buddha's preaching skillfully adapted the Dharma to suit the level of the audiences. Even his dying was a show, performed to encourage the active practice of devotees so that they would take seriously the shortness of mortal life. The *Lotus* asserts that the nirvana of arhats is incomplete, merely a preliminary stage in enlightenment seeking. Rather, all beings are destined for Buddhahood through eons of rebirth in samsara.

The religious ideal in the *Lotus Sutra* and in other Mahayana texts shifts from the arhat to the ***bodhisattva***, or "future Buddha." Disciples following the Great Vehicle are encouraged not to be satisfied with the arhats' limited nirvana when Buddhahood is the proper, final religious goal for all. Why? Mahayana teachers point out that given the reality of interdependence, no individual can be an enlightened "being" somehow independent of others. Bodhisattvas should therefore not imagine ending their careers until all beings are enlightened, a mind-boggling and very long-term commitment.

The *Lotus Sutra* is only one of many texts that focus on bodhisattvas who have earned the merit necessary for rebirth as divinities. These "celestial

Tara, the popular female bodhisattva who is believed to have arisen from the tears of compassion from Avalokiteshvara.

- **Buddha-nature school:** Mahayana belief that all beings possess a "Buddha seed" or "enlightenment seed" as part of their natures
- ***Lotus Sutra*:** early Mahayana text that reveals the universal cosmic character of Buddhas and the Dharma
- **bodhisattva:** a "future Buddha," either in the present life or in a future life

bodhisattvas" continue to serve humanity by offering compassionate intervention to secure worldly blessings and even the means to salvation. In the popular imagination, by the end of the faith's first millennium they had become the Buddhist parallels to Hindu or Chinese deities. The most popular and universal celestial bodhisattva was **Avalokiteshvara**, who came to be known as **Guanyin** in China, *Kannon* in Japan, *Chenrizi* in Tibet, and *Karunamaya* in Nepal. Wherever Mahayana Buddhism spread, texts recounting the compassionate deeds of this always kind divine being were spread by storytellers, art, and popular texts. For the great majority of Buddhists in East Asia, being a Mahayana devotee meant performing rituals and asking for blessings from these and other compassionate bodhisattva divinities.

**Avalokiteshvara/ Guanyin:** celestial Mahayana bodhisattva, popular across Asia

## *Pure Land Schools*

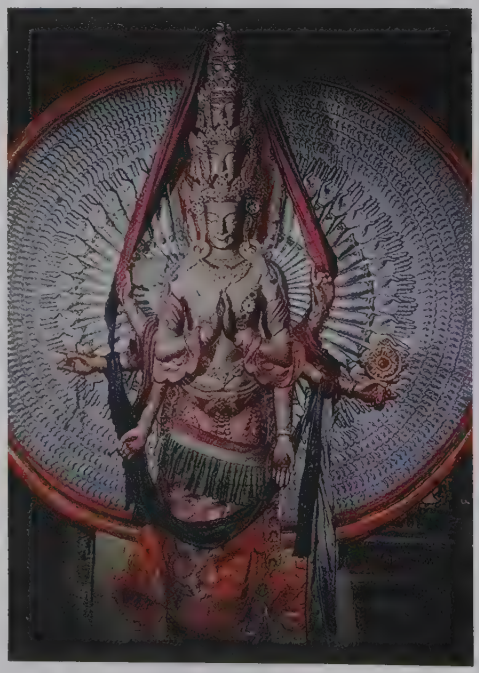
**Pure Land:** a paradise for rebirth created by a bodhisattva, where humans can achieve enlightenment

**Pure Land** Buddhism arose in India, around 300 CE. This school's texts describe how certain bodhisattvas vowed to create celestial paradises on reaching Buddhahood. In these "Pure Lands," there existed all the conditions needed for the individual to be reborn and reach enlightenment. The popularity of this Buddhist orientation, which deferred enlightenment seeking from the human state until rebirth in a heaven, probably had its origins in Shakyamuni's predictions of Buddhism's decline after a thousand years. This expectation allowed for a new spirituality to match the changed times.

**Amitabha/Amida:** celestial Buddha whose Pure Land became the most popular in East Asia

The most important of the Pure Land schools was that associated with the western paradise called *Sukhavati*, skillfully created by a Buddha named **Amitabha** in Sanskrit (*Amitofo* in Chinese, **Amida** in Japanese). A system of Pure Land doctrine and practice developed in China and featured the chanting of Amitabha's name as a meditative act and communal ritual. Exponents assured Pure Land followers that by drawing on this Buddha's distinctive cosmic power through chanting and other devotional practices, even those with bad karma could be reborn in Sukhavati.

The Bodhisattva Vow:
"May I be a protector
for the unprotected
A guide for wanderers
A boat, a bridge, a
causeway for those
who desire the other
shore
A lamp for those who
need light."[4]
—Shantideva's
*Bodhicaryavatara*



Avalokiteshvara, the most popular celestial bodhisattva in the Mahayana tradition. In this sculpture from Tibet, the 1,008 arms convey the divinity's tireless quest to aid those who suffer in samsara.

In Japan, Pure Land Buddhism continued to evolve as devotees were taught that their own "self power" was insufficient to reach nirvana and only the "other power" of celestial Buddhas and bodhisattvas could be relied on. Rituals at death were dedicated to having an individual's lifetime accumulation of merit (punya) be directed to attaining rebirth in the Pure Land. Over the years, these schools expanded, and hopes for Pure

Land rebirth became extremely popular among the laity. Pure Land schools were also the first to deemphasize the requirement of monastic celibacy by its ordained sangha.

### *The Meditation School: Ch'an/Zen*

**Ch'an:** Mahayana school emphasizing meditation, discipline, and individual effort to reach nirvana

**Zen:** name in Japan for the Mahayana Ch'an school

**koans:** spiritual riddles used by Zen teachers to foster spiritual growth

By about 600 CE, a Mahayana school called **Ch'an** had formed in China. In contrast to the Pure Land emphasis on "other power," the Ch'an school insisted that individual effort to reach nirvana was the Buddha's true teaching. Ch'an masters stressed meditation, this-life realization, and "self power." This school still bases its authority on an unbroken line of enlightened teachers from Shakyamuni onward, with each subsequent enlightened master in turn transmitting a "mind of enlightenment" to his key disciple wordlessly, beyond all scriptures.

Less concerned with a single text and formed in close association with Daoist concepts and aesthetics (see Chapter 8), Ch'an lineages respected the Mahayana scriptures but also compiled their texts recounting the teachings of their own patriarchs and masters, including their approaches to unlocking the gates of nirvana realization. This school also developed the use of paradoxical word problems called ***koans*** ("cases") that masters forced their disciples to ponder and answer. Answering the koans could lead to small awakenings of prajna or even to complete nirvana realization. Ch'an masters also insisted on the necessity of mindfulness meditation.

"Unless you enter the great ocean of passions, you cannot get the treasure of full knowledge."

*—Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra*

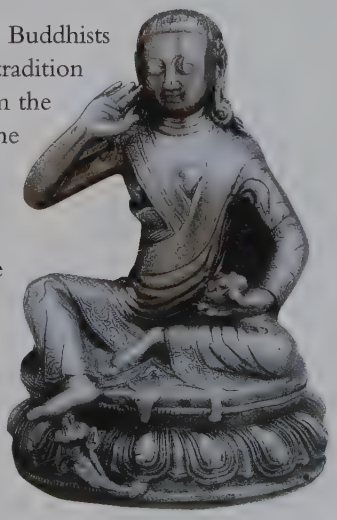
The most important figure of this school is Bodhidharma, the patriarch who is said to have brought the mind-to-mind transmission tradition from India to China, early in the seventh century CE. He is depicted as a fierce meditating monk dispensing terse spiritual admonitions. Later known as **Zen** in Japan, the Ch'an school also developed in monasteries upholding strict monastic rules. Its lineages eventually split along the line of those believing in gradual versus sudden enlightenment.

### *The Thunderbolt Vehicle: Vajrayana*

**Vajrayana/ Thunderbolt Vehicle:** esoteric "vehicle" emphasizing practices that speed progress toward enlightenment

**Zen:** Mahayana school emphasizing meditation, discipline, and individual effort to reach nirvana

One additional branch to emerge among Mahayana Buddhists was the **Vajrayana**, or **Thunderbolt Vehicle**, a tradition that some scholars would consider to be distinct from the Mahayana school. Also called *tantra* and similar to the Hindu tradition of that name, it developed after the faith's first millennium in South Asia. Perhaps in reaction to the complacency stemming from the mainstream view that final enlightenment would not be achieved until after many future lifetimes, the tantric traditions emphasized the rapid realization of salvation in this lifetime. It was also an esoteric tradition, meaning that it was not public or openly shared but was passed on directly—and only—to those the tantric teacher thought capable of understanding and practicing.



Milarepa, the great tantric saint of Tibet, whose songs are beloved for conveying the struggles of solitary meditation and the joy of enlightenment.

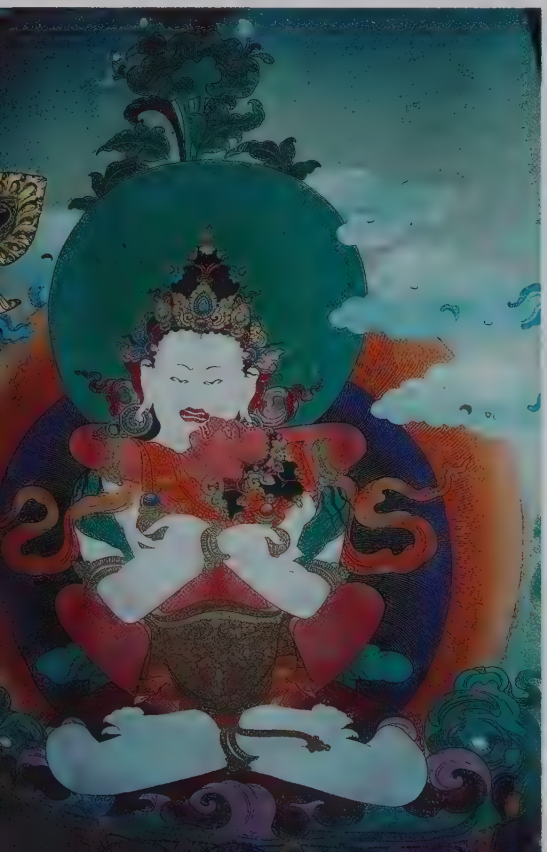
"That by which the world is bound, by that same energy its bonds are released; But the world is deluded and knows not this truth, and he who is deprived of this truth will not gain Enlightenment."

—*Hevajra Tantra*

Tantric Buddhism used Indian yoga techniques and unconventional means under the guidance of an accomplished teacher, and it drew on the Mahayana philosophy that equated samsara with nirvana. It agreed that all beings partake of the Buddha nature (*tathagatagarbha*), and it identified the essence of the Buddha's teaching as the pursuit of unshakable, diamond-like insight by whatever means brought immediate success.

The central experience of tantric Buddhism is communion with a celestial Buddha or bodhisattva through the experience of identification with his or her body, speech, and mind. The sage who discovered each path is thought to have experienced this deity as the embodiment of enlightenment. Thus, an initiate is taught to place the deity in his or her mind's eye, repeat mantras that resonate with that form, and perform rituals that help to solidify the identification. When complete, one's identification ultimately leads to the attainment of enlightenment equal to that of the divine form.

Some tantric traditions consciously break the norms of orthodox caste society. Men and women assume identities as divine, enlightened consorts, and their sexual union is ritually designed to be a powerful spiritual experience of the dual energies of the feminine (as insight) and the masculine (as means of practice). Sexual consort yoga was doubtless once an element in some tantric traditions. But as these traditions were systematized in textual form by Buddhist monks after 900 CE in North India, the requirement of literal sexual yoga practice was reinterpreted to allow its replacement by symbolic visualization.



Tantric icon showing visualization of salvific insight and skillful practice as the union of female and male tantric practitioners.

## Premodern Buddhism: Buddhist Expansion (400–1500 CE)

As Buddhism expanded across Asia up to the early modern era, in each region monks, nuns, and disciples adapted the traditions to local cultural conditions. Across Asia, all the sanghas developed Buddhist rituals to help individuals through their lives, from birth to death. In applying the faith's resources to fulfilling the religious needs of the householders, monks and nuns from all Buddhist doctrinal schools served their lay communities in a similar manner. We now survey the wide-ranging, trans-Asian pilgrimage of Buddhism, noting the history of the faith's evolution and the distinctive beliefs and practices that characterize its regional adaptations.

## South Asia

With the decline of the great Gupta dynasty in North India by 650 CE, small regional governments controlled the Hindu–Buddhist societies of South Asia. Buddhism survived mainly in the northeast under royal patronage, its presence confined largely to monasteries that had also come to function as institutions of learning.

After Buddhism's successful transplantation in China, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, monks and householders traveled to study in South Asia and to acquire texts. They also completed pilgrimage visits, venerating the "sacred traces" (cremation relics, begging bowls, etc.) of the Buddha and arhats whose remains were entombed in the stupas. The Buddha's enlightenment tree in Gaya and the temple erected nearby were at the center of such visits. As Indic Buddhism declined, pious rulers from Sri Lanka and Burma sent funds and artisans to renovate the Gaya site. By 1296, when the last such donations were recorded, almost every Buddhist monastery in the Gangetic plain had been abandoned, and many shrines had been left to decay. The decline of the faith in South Asia was due partly to the successful development of popular devotional Hinduism and by the Hindu monasticism organized by the saint-scholar Shankara, whose Advaita Vedanta school is discussed in Chapter 6.

Another factor in Buddhism's decline was the arrival in South Asia of Islam, another missionary faith that slowly spread throughout the region. By 750 CE, Muslim conquests and conversions to Islam in central Asia and northwestern India were undermining the predominance of Buddhism. As we have seen, Buddhist monasticism was strongly tied to trade and mercantile patronage, and as the trade moving along the silk routes shifted to Muslim merchants, the monasteries lost a major source of support. In addition, an era of raids into North India culminated in 1200 in the first period of Muslim rule from Delhi. Across the northern plains, most remaining large Buddhist institutions were plundered, and the destruction dispersed Indian monks into the Himalayas, to coastal urban centers, and across the seas. In the southern peninsula of the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism also declined slowly, but scattered monasteries existed there as late as the seventeenth century.

Buddhism's dominant region now shifted to East Asia. Because many early versions of the first Buddhist textual collections had been lost, each school settled on surviving texts and scholastic traditions to establish its own doctrinal authority. In East Asia, China became the center of Mahayana Buddhism. The cross-fertilization of Buddhism across Asia was further complicated after 1250, when Tibetan Buddhists exerted strong influences within China, south into the Himalayas, and north into Mongolia.

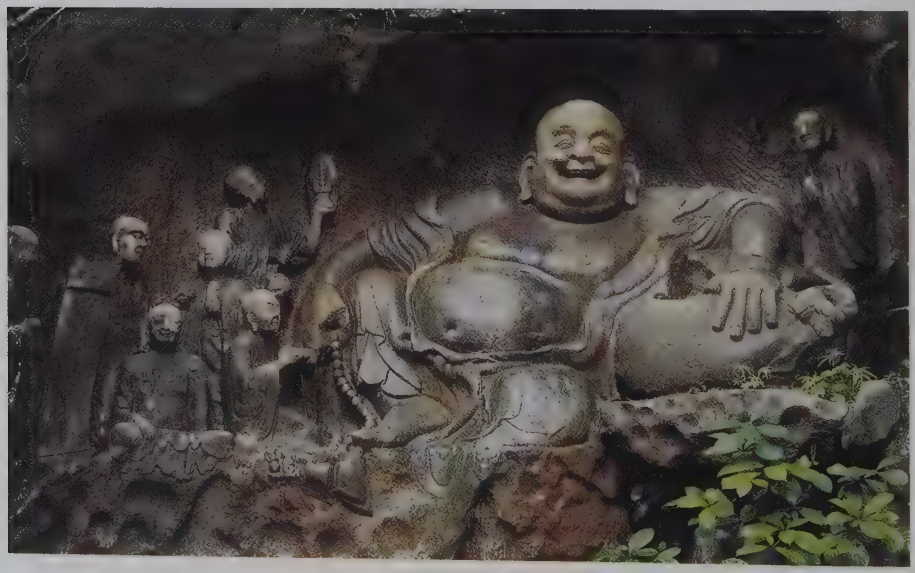
The island of Sri Lanka embraced Buddhism, and its early kings after 100 BCE supported the sangha and built monuments to express their devotion. Although both Mahayanists and Sthaviravadins practiced there throughout the first millennium, the Theravada school eventually prevailed. The "reforms" instituted by various Southeast Asian kings in the 1300s drew on respected Sri Lankan monks who came to reintroduce Theravada ordination and philosophical traditions. From this time onward, Theravada has remained the dominant tradition in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

## China

In East Asia, Mahayana Buddhism alone flourished, translated in terms compatible with Daoist mysticism, the indigenous gods, and aspects of Confucian morality and state governance (see Chapter 8). Under the weak regional states of the pre-T'ang era (up until 645 CE), Buddhism found widespread support. Indian and Central Asian monks had begun a determined project of translating the hundreds of Buddhist texts into Chinese. In addition, monks, merchants, and rulers had obtained many precious relics and had them enshrined in monasteries across China. Finally, Chinese Buddhists came to recognize **Wu Tai Shan**, one of China's sacred mountains, as the home of Manjushri, one of Mahayana Buddhism's chief celestial bodhisattvas. This belief grew as devotees who made pilgrimages to this site had powerful meditative visions of this future Buddha. (So strong was belief in Wu Tai Shan's holiness that its fame spread back to India; Chinese annals note that hundreds of Indian pilgrims traveled to China to seek Manjushri's spiritual blessings there!) Through textual transmission, the location of relics in monastic shrines across the country, and the pilgrimages at this (and other) sacred mountains, Asia was unified by Buddhism.

**Wu Tai Shan:** sacred mountain in China revered as home of the bodhisattva Manjushri

With the consolidation of the T'ang state in Chang-an (modern Xian) and its revival of the traditional Confucian literati class, the destiny of Buddhism rose and fell according to the degree of support from the reigning emperor and his court. Despite the generosity of imperial patrons and wealthy donors who profited from trade along the Silk Road, many Confucian officials in the permanent state bureaucracy criticized Buddhism. They argued that monks and nuns were disloyal to parents, country, and



Images of the corpulent and happy Maitreya, the next Buddha, called Mi-lo Fo in China, are popular in East Asia.

ancestors, and asserted as well that the rising wealth of the monasteries weakened the overall economy.

Anti-Buddhist sentiment culminated in the great persecution of 841–845. Nearly every Buddhist monastery was dismantled, metal images were melted down for the state treasury, and renunciants were ordered to return to lay life. Buddhism eventually rebuilt and rebounded, but the faith never permeated Chinese society so thoroughly again. From the Sung era onward, it was the Ch'an and Pure Land schools that survived, being less dependent on official recognition or aristocratic patronage. Leading monks repositioned the faith in Chinese society by stressing the compatibility of Buddhism with Daoism and Confucianism.

During the short-lived Mongol conquest of China marking the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion, and its distinctive Mahayana–Vajrayana traditions were granted strong support across the empire, primarily in imperial strongholds. The Mongols' conversion to Buddhism, soon after their thirteenth-century campaigns of violent conquest across Eurasia, marks another point at which Buddhism changed world history, in this case by undercutting Mongol martial values and expansionism.

With the return of native Chinese rule under the Ming dynasty (1392–1644), Mahayana traditions were embraced by a large sector of the population: worship of the celestial bodhisattva Guanyin, veneration of the sixteen saints designated as protectors of Buddhism until the coming of the next Buddha, and releasing animals (typically fish or birds) to earn merit. The corpulent form of the next Buddha **Maitreya** (in China, **Mi-lo Fo**) appeared as a distinctively Chinese image. From the early Ming, too, the practice of householders keeping detailed merit account books gained in popularity. In China as elsewhere, merit-making and ritual observances dominated the religious life of most Buddhists.

**Maitreya/Mi-lo Fo:** the next historical Buddha, uniquely depicted in China as corpulent and happy

## Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia after the year 1200 was ruled by regional states that supported the Theravada Buddhist monastic system introduced from Sri Lanka. Buddha relics were imported as well, and stupas in the Sri Lankan style were built across the region. Kings of the new states reduced the presence of the Mahayana to a few isolated communities, and only their rituals endured in temple practices. However, the Khmer state for several periods was ruled by kings who favored Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, and they constructed magnificent temples and monasteries.

From the early eighth century, the large and prosperous Srivijaya Empire in Sumatra and Java also supported both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. These rulers created the colossal stupa at Borobodur, the crowning monument of this era. But with the empire's decline in the thirteenth century, the smaller states ruled by regional kings favored local religions or, later, the schools of Islam originating in India.

Yet in the majority of the Southeast Asian polities, it was Theravada Buddhism that thrived under rulers who claimed legitimacy under the cosmic law of karma (i.e., their past merit entitled them to rule in the present). Their states supported the sangha

and sponsored rituals designed to have the powers of the Buddhist universe continually regenerated. In turn, they expected the people to emulate their example by following the Dharma, supporting a just Buddhist order in the territory, and accepting their place in the karma-determined social hierarchy. The many hundreds of grand stupas, image halls, and monasteries built in these prosperous states show the success of premodern Theravada Buddhism. Across Theravadin Southeast Asia, this form of "state Buddhism" survived even after the kingdoms of the premodern era gave way to smaller regional states. However, this form of traditional, hierarchical Buddhism was to be challenged in the modern era as new ideas and political systems emerged.

## Japan

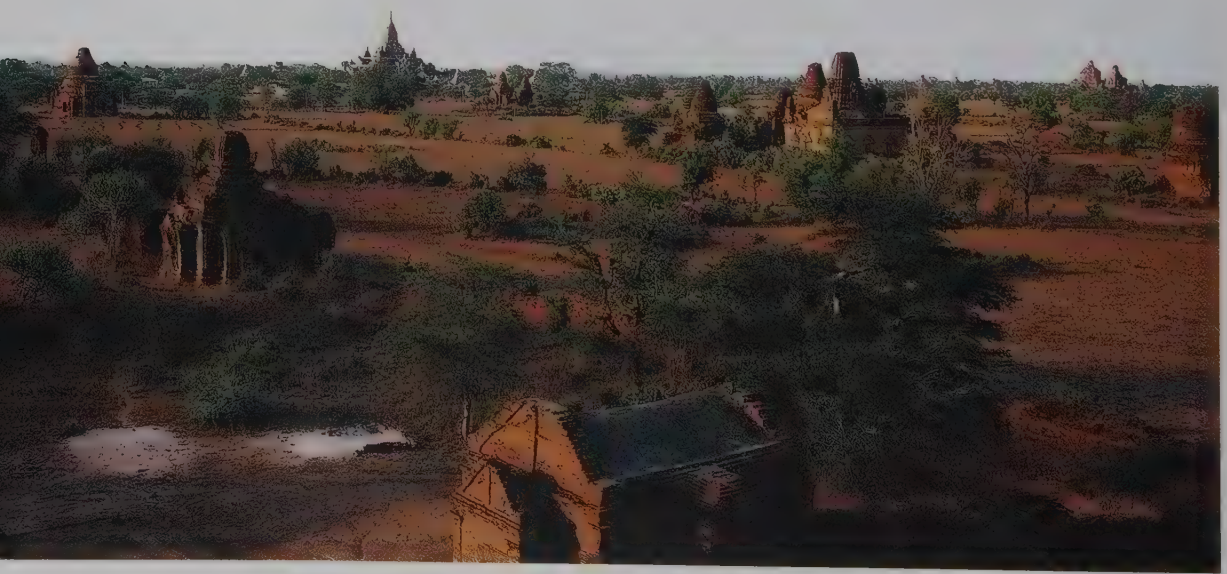
**Dogen:** Japanese monk; founder of Soto Zen school

**Eisai:** Japanese monk; founder of Rinzai Zen school

**Nembutsu:** chant of Pure Land Buddhists, reflecting aspiration for rebirth in a paradise

Mahayana Buddhism was adopted across East Asia, originally reaching Japan in the seventh century. By 1230, Japanese monks again had traveled to China to undertake the last transplantations of Chinese schools: two forms of the Ch'an became the Soto Zen school (instituted by the monk **Dogen** [1200–1253]) and the Rinzai Zen school (under the monk **Eisai** [1141–1215]). Both schools vied for popularity among the aristocrats and warriors who controlled Japanese society in the post-Kamakura era (after 1350).

The Pure Land school also found widespread acceptance through the public preaching campaigns undertaken by monks. Since their simplification of Buddhist practice entailed only the **Nembutsu**, the chant "*Namo A-mi-t'o Fo*," the honorific repetition of Amitabha Buddha's name, householders could hope for nirvana in Pure Land rebirth. A thirteenth-century Japanese monk named Shinran continued the basic rituals and textual interpretations from Chinese Pure Land teachers and added an emphasis on *mappo*, the so-called decadent-age doctrine. Shinran argued that human



Archaeological remains of Pagan (Myanmar), one of the greatest Buddhist cities in the world between 1000 and 1400 CE.

beings were now completely dependent on the Buddha's grace to reach nirvana and had simply to acknowledge their grateful acceptance of it to elicit Amida's grace and enter the Pure Land. Shinran's Jodo Shinshu school became a vital separate lineage, and its sangha was the first in Japan to drop the requirement of celibacy.

**Nichiren:** Japanese monk who taught that the *Lotus Sutra* is the only true Buddhist text

A third track in this era of new Japanese schools is represented by **Nichiren** (1222–1282), a prophetic and charismatic monk who taught that the *Lotus Sutra* is the only true Buddhist text. Practice in the Nichiren school was simplified to three devotional acts: a short, honorific repetition of the *Lotus Sutra*'s title (*Nam-Myoho Reng-e Kyo*); meditation on an image of the cosmic Buddha designed by Nichiren; and pilgrimage to the school's national shrine. Later, the monk's followers taught that Nichiren himself was a bodhisattva. Their interpretation of Buddhism emphasized Japan's special significance in leading Buddhism through the declining stage of history, a visionary view that endured to inspire several splinter movements in the modern and postwar eras.

"In short, at all times and all occasions be not separated from these three, namely devotion to your teachers, an open heart to the world and all it contains, and compassion to sentient beings."[5]

—Dolpo Lama's advice

## The Himalayan Region

In Tibet, Mongolia, and Nepal, Mahayana schools also dominated, and Vajrayana traditions came to be regarded as the Buddha's highest teaching. Monks who introduced Buddhism in this region taught that Buddhist belief and practice have both outer and inner levels of understanding, the highest of which was accessible only through tantric initiation and practice. Tibetan scholars translated, commented on, and interpreted

"Nichiren Confuses his Enemies," a woodcut print by Utagawa Kinuyoshi (1798–1861). Nichiren's disciples followed the teacher's example of practicing aggressive missionary exposition, a trend that has marked the school up to the present.

scores of Sanskrit texts. Ritual masters also applied the texts and teachings to many aspects of life, designing rituals to promote health, prosperity, and the best possible rebirth. Even flags, watermills, and hand-turned wheels were adapted to broadcast the Buddha's teaching, continuously earning merit for individuals and communities.

In Tibet, too, the celestial bodhisattva doctrine was made more accessible to the laity: Extraordinary monks and nuns came to be identified as incarnations of these divinities, and after 1250, these "incarnate lineages" became institutions endowed with lands and households, even assuming power as both religious and political leaders of their regions. Allied with the military might of the Mongols, leaders of the major Tibetan monasteries ascended to rule over central Tibet, a situation unprecedented in any other Buddhist society. The **Gelugpa** school, under the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, came to rule Tibet in 1642, concentrating secular and religious power in its large, land-owning monasteries. Roughly 20 percent of the male population were monks.

**Gelugpa:** monastic school that politically dominated all others by 1640; its head, the Dalai Lama, ruled Tibet until 1959

## Buddhism and Modernity

The current condition of Buddhism across Asia is the result of its institutional development and how the tradition evolved in very different social, political, and cultural contexts. The monastic institution that has always been at the center of Buddhist communities faced daunting challenges in the colonial era, while the different crises, influences, and possibilities of each region led to different historical tracks. The general pattern of Buddhism's adaptation in all societies, the diversity that resulted, and the exchanges between monastics and householders that sustained it are central to this story.

The Potala in Lhasa, Tibet, was the palace of the Dalai Lamas from 1649 until 1959, when the fourteenth Dalai Lama went into exile.

### Early Modern Buddhist Polities: Monastics, Householders, Kings

One decisive factor in Buddhist history has been the relation between the institutional religion and political power, a recurring source of controversy from the colonial period until the present. Buddhists have always looked to the legend of Ashoka to define their relationship with rulers as protectors and patrons. Only with such support can the sangha's integrity be ensured, the Buddha's monuments maintained, and the teachings passed down.

For most of its history, the Buddhist sangha has existed in polities ruled by kings or emperors. As a result, a mutually beneficial tradition developed: The sangha adopted rules in harmony with those of the state and would applaud exemplary moral leadership on the part of the monarch. In premodern times, monastic Buddhism usually served

to promote social stability, accommodating itself to local traditions. The monks also chanted mantras and performed merit-making rituals on behalf of rulers, a custom that continues in modern Japan, Thailand, and Nepal.

## Buddhist Monasticism

A monastery (vihara) can be of humble construction or built to imperial, aristocratic standards. Each, however, must have a place for the monks to sleep and a building in which they hold gatherings. Monasteries may also have shrines with Buddha images, one or more stupas, a "bodhi tree," and a meditation hall.

The subsistence of the monks and nuns has remained dependent on the donations of food and shelter by the lay community. Originally, all sangha members gathered their food in morning begging rounds, and the day's solid food had to be eaten by noon. By the modern period, however, Buddhists had developed various routines: In some places, members of the laity would come to the monastery on a rotating schedule with food donations; in other places, monks cooked their own foods. Many Mahayana monasteries of East Asia interpreted the moral rules to require vegetarianism of the monks and nuns, but in recent centuries, the restriction against alcohol was taken by most to mean "no intoxication," not complete abstinence.

### *Meditation Practices*

Meditation remained essential only for those aspirants, lay and renunciant, actively seeking to move on the final path to nirvana. This practice by monks and nuns, even if only a few, certifies Buddhism's continuing spiritual vitality, inspiring lay folk to respect and take refuge in the sangha. Until the modern era, however, it was almost entirely the elite among monks and nuns who practiced meditation.

Although Buddhism inherited the ancient Indian practice of trance (*samadhi*), it is not given highest priority as this state does not lead to nirvana realization. The key practice is called *insight meditation*, or ***vipassana meditation***: a careful attending to, or being mindful of, the three characteristics of existential reality—suffering (*duhkha*), impermanence (*anitya*), and nonself (*anatman*).

**vipassana meditation:** Buddhist meditation practice focusing on breath and body

The practice as taught today is simple: While focusing awareness on the breath, the practitioner lets go of all intervening thoughts. This opens up an awareness of the "inner life" of the mind, which we normally ignore. With such heightened awareness, mindfulness meditation shows how suffering and change are inevitable, nourishes personal detachment that diminishes desire, and cultivates the spiritual insight (prajna) that dispels ignorance. The development of prajna and the removal of ignorance eliminate bad karma and create good karma. Perfection eventually leads to the fullness of prajna in a breakthrough, transformative experience of an enlightened mind (bodhi).

Mahayana meditations elaborated on these precedents. Ch'an or Zen mindfulness meditation focuses first on the breath, using it to anchor attention and keep the mind free of random thoughts. During intensive meditative periods called *sesshin*, a "master of discipline" patrols the hall to strike monks who fall asleep on the shoulder with a

Japanese and Brazilian monks meditate and chant to bless the Copan Building in downtown São Paulo, Brazil, in 2010. Increasingly, converts and Asian monastics are members of the same sangha.

wooden stick. Given the Mahayana teaching that all beings possess the Buddha nature, meditation can comprise any activity practiced with mindfulness, from walking to martial arts to arranging flowers.

In Pure Land meditation, the fervent wish to attain nirvana in an otherworldly western paradise (*Sukhavatî*) encourages devotees to visualize that paradise as described in the texts. These practices are especially important as death nears, for individuals who can visualize this realm are promised painless passage into heavenly rebirth through the boundless grace of the Buddha Amitabha.

Schools devoted to esoteric Vajrayana innovations developed yet other forms of meditation under the heading of *sadhana*. These tantric practices are based on mind's-eye visualizations of enlightened bodhisattvas and mantra recitations to jump-start spiritual development. By controlling the appearance of mental images, one sees all experience as mind-constructed and thus empty (*shunya*) of any ultimate reality.

Again, however, it is necessary to emphasize that most Buddhists—yesterday and today—concentrated their devotional activities on rituals and on accumulating merit rather than on meditation. Thus, we turn to gift giving as the foundation of Buddhist practice.

## *Punya and Dana: The Fundamental Buddhist Exchange*

The Buddha set out a "framework of spiritual teachings for disciples." Still used as a guide for modern Buddhist teachers, the sequence counsels progression through the following stages of religious striving:

**dana:** "self-less giving" to diminish desire: the chief merit-making activity in Buddhist societies

1. ***Dana*** ("self-less giving" to diminish desire)
2. ***Shila*** ("morality")

3. ***Svarga*** ("heaven")
4. ***Dharma-deshana*** ("instruction on doctrine") on the Four Noble Truths

Just as merit, or punya, has provided the chief orientation point and goal in the Buddhist layperson's worldview and ethos, dana has always been the starting practice for accumulating it. Merit-making for most Buddhists, including most monks and nuns, is the central measure of spiritual advancement. Merit-making remains the universal, integrating transaction in Buddhist settings through the modern era, regardless of the respective intellectual elite's orientation toward competing Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana doctrinal formulations or spiritual disciplines.

The wish for merit leading to rebirth in heaven has remained the most popular Buddhist aspiration. Householders can "plant" donations, and the "harvest" in good karma they earn will be great. Punya is needed for a good rebirth, and though Buddhist doctrine holds that heaven is a temporary state, the reward of heavenly rebirth has motivated many to be "good Buddhists."

Merit-making can lead one closer to nirvana, but it also has practical, worldly consequences, impacting destiny both now and across future lifetimes. Therefore, Buddhists seek punya to change the karma "account" that affects them in this life as well as to modify future rebirth destiny.

### *Rituals and Festivals*

Buddhist monasteries developed ritual procedures and a yearly festival calendar. The monk's vocation came to include priestly duties, performing rituals that linked the Buddha's spoken words with simple gestures. In one universal Buddhist ritual, monks pour water into a vessel as they chant words revealed by the Buddha. Now imbued with healing powers, the liquid can be drunk or sprinkled over the bodies of those needing assistance. All Buddhist schools encourage meritorious offerings of lamps, incense, and flowers to Buddha images, bodhi trees, and stupas; all are made through rituals of donation.

In the Mahayana schools, an important part of a bodhisattva's service to others is through ritual service, and some monks specialized in chanting sound chains called *mantras*, known for their spiritual powers. Ritual chanting of the Buddha's own teachings is thought to further the foundations of spiritual practice and infuse communities with blessings, including good karma. Ritual service thus came to dominate Mahayana Buddhism in its missionary program; mantra recitations were thought to activate the unseen cosmic Buddha powers promised in the Mahayana texts.

The semimonthly Buddhist holiday called *uposatha* occurs each fortnight on the new-moon and full-moon days. On uposatha, sangha members privately recite the details confirming that they are monastics in good standing according to the *Vinaya* rules. This recitation follows a private confession, to the renunciant's superior, of any transgressions of the rules during the period. Uposatha continues in the modern era to uphold the proper standards of monastery discipline in Theravada societies.

## Selections from a Chinese Buddhist Merit Account Sheet

In East Asia, followers interpreted Buddhist teachings in original ways, in some cases applying the basic ideas into new formulations. By the Ming era, Buddhist monks and householders thought it useful to assign mathematical values to articulate the hierarchy of moral actions, as in this example:

*1 Merit:* Give an article to help others; chant a Buddhist scripture; provide for one monk; return a lost article; help repair a public road or bridge

*3 Merits:* Endure ill treatment without complaint; bury an animal; urge those making a living by killing to stop

*5 Merits:* Prevent a lawsuit; cure a minor illness; stop someone from slandering; make an offering to a saintly person; save any animal; pray for others

*10 Merits:* Recommend a virtuous person; cure a major illness; speak virtuously; save the life of an animal; publish the Buddha's teachings; treat servants properly

*30 Merits:* Convert another to Buddhism; facilitate a marriage; take in an orphan; help another do something virtuous

*50 Merits:* Prevent an abortion; provide for a homeless person; prevent someone from committing a serious crime; give a speech that benefits many

*100 Merits:* Save one life; save a woman's chastity; prevent a child from drowning; continue a family lineage

*1 Demerit:* Urge another to fight; help another do evil; waste food; kill insects; turn away a begging monk; take a bribe; keep a lost article

*3 Demerits:* Get angry over words spoken; cheat an ignorant person; destroy another's success; be greedy

*5 Demerits:* Slander spiritual teachings; turn away a sick person; speak harshly; kill any animal; write or speak lewdly; not clear an injustice when possible

*10 Demerits:* Mistreat an orphan or widow; prepare a poison; kill an animal that serves humans; speak harshly to parent or teacher

*30 Demerits:* Create slander that dishonors another; disobey an elder; cause a family to separate; during famine, fail to share food grains

*50 Demerits:* Induce an abortion; break up a marriage; teach someone to do great evil; make a speech that harms many

*100 Demerits:* Cause a death; rape; end a family lineage

Source: Guide formulated by Liao-Fan Yuan (1550–1624), a Zen master of Jiang-su Province. Translated in *The Key to Creating One's Destiny* (Singapore: Lapis Lazuli Press, 1988), pp. 43–46. Passages edited and in places paraphrased.

Emphasizing the fundamental interdependence between sangha and lay community, householders visit the local vihara on these days to make dana offerings. The regular succession of uposathas and the two half-moon days are when Buddhists typically undertake meritorious actions, perform rituals, and engage in meditation practices. In effect, each week has a special day for Buddhist observances. Like other great world religions, Buddhism also formed the basis of distinctive cultures that organized the year with regular monthly and yearly festivals.

Theravada monk sprinkling a householder with water over which the sacred words of the Buddha have been chanted.

## *The Universal Buddhist Shrine*

For all Buddhist schools, the stupa (or ***caitya***, a term that can also signify any Buddha shrine) became a landmark denoting the tradition's spiritual presence. Buddhism eventually recognized "eight great relic caityas" for pilgrimage and veneration in South Asia. Stupa worship thus became the chief focus of Buddhist ritual activity, and this has continued through the modern era to the present. The Buddhist relic cult began early, inspiring monks, nuns, and householders to circumambulate the shrines (in the clockwise direction) and to have their own cremated remains deposited in the same great stupa or in smaller votive stupas located nearby.

Throughout Buddhist history, the stupa has served as a place to go to recall the Buddha's great acts, a "power place" tapping the Buddha's (or saint's) relic's healing potency, a site to earn merit through veneration, and a monument marking the conversion and control of local spirits. In the Mahayana schools, the stupa was also thought of as a symbol of Buddhahood's omnipresence, a center of Mahayana text revelation, and a perfect form showing the unity of the natural elements (earth, fire, air, and water) with the Buddha nature.

**caitya:** Buddhist shrine

Buddhist stupa being whitewashed by a monk in Ladakh, in North India near the Tibetan border. Monks, nuns, and laity have built these shrines since the Buddha's death.

Later, Buddhists identified stupas as the physical representations of the eternal teachings. They also expanded the possible sacred objects deposited in them to include Buddha's words in textual form. Stupas thus remain the natural sites for Buddhist festivals of remembrance and veneration.

### *Death Ritualism*

In all Buddhist countries today, death rituals, despite many regional differences, are the exclusive purview of the sangha and a key time for monks to expound core teachings and receive dana. Buddhist mourners carefully dispose of the corpse, relying on rituals performed by monks to ensure that the dead person does not become a hungry ghost or a demon. They also seek to avert bad destiny for the deceased by making punya and then transferring it to the dead person. In adopting such practices, Buddhists straddle both alternatives to the ancient Indic question of whether destiny is based strictly on an individual's own karma over a lifetime or whether the proper performance of rituals during and immediately after death can override unfavorable karma and manipulate rebirth destiny. Both Theravada monks and—more expansively—Mahayana ritualists apply ritual expertise to this time. The tradition's dependence on after-death ritual service for sangha donations is evident in all modern Asian traditions.

## Buddhism Under Colonialism (1500–1960)

The modern era was one of widespread decline for Buddhism across Asia. Medieval states either lost their autonomy or were destabilized by colonialism, first by European powers (the British in Burma, India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and China; the French in Indochina; the Portuguese and Dutch in Sri Lanka; and the Dutch in Indonesia) and later, in the early twentieth century, by Japanese conquest and occupation. In East Asia, the imperial Chinese state was weakened by the colonial powers (primarily Britain), whose aggressive trade practices, backed by military intervention, disrupted the Chinese economy. The civil disorders that followed also undermined Buddhist institutions. (These events are discussed in Chapter 8.)

The impact of European colonialism on Buddhism can be summarized under two broad domains, institutional and doctrinal. Dutch, British, and French colonial governments all eventually declined to fulfill the traditional native king's role of patron

Typical gathering of devotees at the southern shrine of the Swedagon stupa, a Burmese temple in present-day Myanmar.

and protector of the local religions, including Buddhism. As a result, the accommodations that had evolved over the centuries to perpetuate Buddhism ceased to exist. Colonial administrations also typically ceased enforcement of indigenous land-tenure relations and taxation, withdrew from supervision of monastic ordination, and halted ceremonies according respect to venerable monastic leaders, sacred symbols, and temples. The roots of modern crisis and Buddhism's decline across the region are easily traced to this abrupt deprivation of resources and political support.

## Challenges from Colonialism, Communism, and Modern Crises (1800–Present)

In the realm of ideas, the colonial powers introduced two often-contradictory systems of thought. These were, on the one hand, the scientific notions derived from the Enlightenment, and on the other, theories of racial, cultural, and religious superiority that were used to legitimate the triumphant expansion of Euro-Christian peoples.

Enlightenment ideals (democracy, modern science, and technology) were imported into Asia through schools built by the colonial governments. The reach of the colonial governments was broader than this, however, for in fact they were the official and secular extensions of the European home states. In addition, the colonial administrators generally supported the expansion of the Christian missionary presence, and it was with such backing that the first modern global Christian missions were created. Across Asia, lay and ordained Christians built churches and established schools, hospitals, and charities. Some proselytized aggressively through public preaching and pamphlets attacking Buddhist beliefs and practices.

After the fall of the Ching dynasty in 1912, socioeconomic conditions remained unstable under the Republic of China. Throughout the twentieth century, the traditional Buddhist schools and Buddhist thought were subject to criticism by leaders of a modernizing faction called the May 4th Movement. To respond to those who claimed that Buddhism was parasitic and corrupt due to its landholdings, China's greatest modern reformer, Taixu (1889–1947), suggested that Chinese Buddhists should follow the ancient Ch'an school's policy of combining field labor with spiritual life, developing a "Buddhist work ethic" within the monasteries. The sustained Communist Party policy of destruction, denigration, and disestablishment that began in 1949, however, had no precedent in Buddhist history since 845 CE.

At first disturbed and demoralized, Buddhists recovered from and responded to colonial-era challenges in various ways. Although few converted to Christianity, Buddhist intellectuals and preachers emerged to engage in the dialogue with science and Christianity. In Sri Lanka, for example, early Protestant missionaries, having assessed Buddhist monks as uniformly indolent and ignorant, felt themselves on the verge of mass conversion. Yet a series of public debates ended badly for those missionaries, a reversal that restored public faith in the ongoing relevance of Buddhist doctrine.

Buddhist reformers involved the lay society of Sri Lanka more fully in Buddhist institutions and spiritual practices, motivating some among the laity to take the place of former royal patrons. In turn, the lay reformers insisted that monks respect the sangha rules and discipline, and they supported the revival of monastic meditation practice, usually in newly created, reformist monastic schools. To publicize these reforms, Buddhists adopted one aspect of Christian missionary methodology: They began investing in printing technology and undertaking publications that defined reformist doctrines and practices. They also rediscovered the practice of public sermonizing.

Reformers in Thailand, as in Sri Lanka, also articulated new interpretations of "true Buddhism." They taught that Buddhism in its pure form was not concerned

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: The Enlightenment of Zen Master Sokeian Sasaki

Although the canonical texts counsel monastics not to discuss their own spiritual attainments, the following account of his enlightenment is from a respected modern Zen master:

One day I wiped out all notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer—as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me . . . and Ztt! I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the center of the cosmos. I spoke, but my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming toward me, but all were the same man. All were myself! I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created. I was the cosmos; no Mr. Sasaki existed.

Source: *Zen Notes* 1, no. 5 (1954), pp. 17–18.

with communal rituals or harnessing the cosmic powers of Buddhism to support the secular kingdom. Most reform leaders were critical of—even hostile to—"superstitions," rituals, and other local accommodations. Meditation was now the heart of "true Buddhism," and it was no longer restricted to monks and nuns. All Buddhists could and should feel capable of seeking nirvana.

### The Twentieth-Century Buddhist Revival Gains Strength

By the early twentieth century, the revival process in Asia was supported by the first generation of Europeans sympathetic to Buddhism, who saw in the faith a nontheistic spirituality that was a compelling alternative to dogmatic monotheism. Many Western seekers interpreted Buddhism as encouraging spiritual experimentation through meditation rather than requiring blind faith.

Easier travel for Westerners also allowed sympathetic Europeans and North Americans to assist native Asian Buddhist modernists as they argued back against Christian ministers. Members of the Theosophical Society, a European group formed to pursue the mystical teachings thought to underlie all the world religions, created new institutions, including English-language Buddhist schools and lay organizations such as Buddhist teaching programs modeled after Christian Sunday schools. In Asia, Buddhist nationalists also became involved in politics, seeking more favorable relations with—and eventually independence from—the European colonial governments.

Early Western scholarship and archaeological expeditions under the auspices of the British colonial government also added to the awareness of modern Asian Buddhists. European scholars used modern critical methods to translate and interpret the earliest canonical texts and then disseminated them globally. In fact, it was common for the newly educated, indigenous intelligentsia in Buddhist countries to read their first passages from a canonical Buddhist text in an English translation.

As Buddhist literature in English became available and general literacy increased, voices from outside the sangha joined the contested discussion of "what the Buddha really taught." Thus, throughout the Buddhist world, the leaders of the old Buddhist establishments were often challenged to conform to the standards of discipline set forth in the monastic texts. In most Buddhist countries, colonial and postcolonial governments sought to eliminate sources of political dissent by imposing on the sangha regulations supposedly designed to "keep pure" the local Buddhist institutions.

The global diaspora of Buddhism followed the networks of empire, disseminating through Western converts who became aware of Asian religions as a result of expanding communications and travel. By 1920, Buddhist centers in the West had been established by Euro-American converts and immigrants. As depicted in early popular (and sympathetic) accounts, the Buddha was a rationalist who rejected ritual as well as a heroic social reformer. Buddhism was seen not as a religion but as an atheistic philosophy compatible with science. Buddhist meditation, however, was regarded as an authentic, ancient spiritual practice, an aspect that attracted Westerners interested in the new field of psychology.

Euro-American contact with Mahayana Buddhism came earliest with Japanese Zen. Westerners were drawn to Zen's emphasis on meditation as well as its connection with the fine arts. During the years leading up to World War II, however, Japan embarked on an imperialistic course, one that showed the continuing strength of the tradition of Zen leaders supporting aristocratic warriors and rationalizing nationalistic violence.

Once Japan opened itself to the modern world with the restoration of the emperor in 1868, Japan's leaders sought to create a modern industrial state based on nationalism. Shinto was promoted as the shared national faith, and the emperor was revered as a living god. The nationalist movement also involved the deliberate diminishment of Buddhism, which (despite its 1,400 years in Japan) was criticized as "a foreign religion" inferior to Shinto. Many Buddhist monasteries and temples had their lands confiscated and state patronage withdrawn. In response, some Buddhist organizations instituted reforms that involved undertaking social work, educational initiatives, and the renewal of global missions. Some schools, such as Zen, even issued strong public pronouncements in favor of the government's nationalism and militarism, with prominent monasteries raising money for armaments. In the years immediately following World War II, Zen Buddhism particularly attracted segments of bohemian and intellectual Western society, furthering an interest that still grows today.

## Buddhism and Postmodern Trends in a Postcolonial World

With the end of World War II and, soon after, the demise of colonialism, most Asian nations faced the need to reinvent their societies both politically and culturally. Those who sought the rebuilding and renewal of Buddhism in postwar China, Mongolia, Vietnam,

and North Korea faced dangerous hostility from communist rulers who regarded Buddhist doctrine as superstition and Buddhist institutions as parasitic on society. These nations disbanded the communities of monks, nuns, and householders; destroyed their buildings and images; and discredited all forms of Buddhist belief and practice.

As Asia's rapid industrialization created new wealth, urbanization led to new forms of social dislocation, especially dramatic increases in the numbers of wage-dependent workers and an unprecedented series of ecological crises. At the same time, Asia saw an expansion of higher education and the rise of educated classes alongside new commercial elites. As a result of these changes, Buddhism was transplanted into entirely new social contexts and drawn into political struggles and global dialogues.

Buddhist movements today make use of the same approaches seen across the globe in other faiths. Some leaders reject modernity, seeking to return to traditional practices. Others strive to adapt Buddhism to the global realities of the postcolonial world. Still others blend traditionalism and reform, "rescuing" from the past what in their view is the essence of Buddhism while employing modern technologies to propagate the Dharma. New institutions have been created to champion strict adherence to monastic norms, scholastic learning, and meditation. Most commonly, organizations led by householders have been the most active and effective in adapting Buddhist teachings and practices to the world today.

## South Asia

South Asia is the "holy land" where the Buddha was born, enlightened, and died and where Buddhism itself has endured over 2,500 years. Yet among the contemporary countries of the region—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal—only in the Himalayan regions of the north and on the island of Sri Lanka to the south has Buddhism remained strong.

### *Remnants of Buddhism in India: Reconstruction in the Places of Origin*

Today, Buddhism is found in the modern nation of India only in very small, and recently established, communities. Most important for the faith's revival in the land of its origins are the sacred sites archaeologists discovered during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the sites that had sunk into oblivion after the Muslim conquest of South Asia (since 1200 CE), the site where the Buddha was enlightened under the bodhi tree became the most significant and controversial. Identified by British officials in the mid-1800s in the modern city of Gaya, the "Great Enlightenment" temple, called the Mahabodhi, has again become a focal point for Buddhists. Its reformers in the colonial era focused on reestablishing the sanctity of this temple as their first step in reviving Buddhism. In recent decades, over twenty Buddhist monasteries, as well as libraries, study centers, and pilgrim hostels, have been erected there. Reformist Buddhists are also attempting to reestablish the site as Buddhism's holiest center and pilgrimage destination, a shrine that unifies all Buddhists. Despite hard work by generations of reformers, however, this remains an unmet goal.

# GENDER FOCUS: Buddhist Women

## Yesterday and Today

A central issue facing Buddhism today is the sangha's ability to adapt and lead in the postcolonial world. In particular, how the tradition resolves its policies on the status of Buddhist women, especially renunciants, is pivotal.

We have seen how the Buddha reluctantly admitted women into the sangha, albeit with stricter rules and under the authority of monks. With this move, the Buddha stated that, even though women were the spiritual equals of men and capable of reaching enlightenment, they still had to submit to the men in the sangha. The Buddhist sangha from its beginnings offered women a refuge from marriage, house-bound widowhood, and poverty, and the work of women as nuns, devout householders, and patrons was an important factor contributing to its success throughout its history. In the distant past, as today, a visitor to a local Buddhist temple or a remote pilgrimage center would almost certainly find women as the majority of those present doing the rituals, walking the pilgrimage routes, and maintaining the shrines.

In modern times, when monasteries declined and patronage suffered disruption under colonialism, the nun's order in many places disappeared, disrupting the traditional pattern. In the postcolonial era, women in many Buddhist societies have sought ways to restore their role and status in the Buddhist community. In 1987, at an international conference held in Bodh Gaya, 150 devout women formed a worldwide organization called *Shakyaditya*. The "Shakya Daughters" are dedicated to the restoration of the full ordination of *bhikshunis* (nuns) among the Theravadins, a lineage most Buddhist monks of this school view as having died out almost a millennium ago. Throughout the Buddhist world today, many highly committed women have adopted an unofficial and unheralded ascetic lifestyle involving meditation, service, or study. In every country today, there is also a male-dominated sangha that controls the Buddhist institutions, and the great majority of monks strongly resist changes in the gender status quo and so oppose taking any action to restore the bhikshuni order.

Yet some women who have adopted the lifestyle of the nun do not, in fact, even wish to take the full bhikshuni ordination. Why? According to the *Vinaya* rules, fully ordained women admitted into the sangha must accept the formal supervision of the senior monks. Presently, in their unofficial status, these renunciants enjoy near-complete autonomy to manage their living arrangements and spiritual training. They argue that since their real loyalty is to the Dharma and their true concern is nirvana-seeking discipline, it is pointless to seek formal recognition. But remaining "unofficial" places severe limitations on the women's ability to build their institutions, since they are not recognized for state patronage and householder donations to them do not yield the same prestige or merit-return that comes from donations to the fully ordained monks. As a result, most of the unofficial "nuns" today remain impoverished, without special honor in their societies at large and marginal to the dominant Buddhist community.

Since 2000, over 400 women practicing in all the Theravada countries have gone to Chinese Mahayana monasteries (in mainland China or Taiwan) to receive full nun's official ordination, much to the consternation of the traditionalist monks. Can Buddhist traditions facing so many future challenges afford to relegate to the margins of their societies the energy, compassion, and merit of such women?

Even after decades of negotiations, control over the Mahabodhi temple has eluded the Buddhist organizations, for Hindu priests and politicians have failed to turn over ownership of the shrine. By 1992, frustrations at unfulfilled promises peaked. Several resident monks threatened to immolate themselves, and several others began hunger strikes. The provocation for this confrontation was severe: Hindu priests had enthroned a lingam, the phallic icon of Shiva, on a temple altar and performed pujas to treat the five Buddha images in the temple as if they were Hindu deities. As the stalemate continued, in 2013 several bombs were detonated near the shrine, injuring five, allegedly in retaliation for Buddhist actions against Muslims in Burma.

### *"Protestant Buddhism" in Sri Lanka: An Enduring Colonial-Era Reformation of the Faith*

**Protestant Buddhism:** pattern of reform in which Buddhists adopted perspectives of Protestant Christianity

The modern reformation of Buddhist tradition begun in colonial Sri Lanka has been described as "**Protestant Buddhism**." The term conveys two distinct but connected historical trends. The first is obvious: the adoption of aspects of missionary Protestant Christianity into the Buddhist framework to revitalize its institutions, practices, and doctrines. The second is an ironic reference to a past marked by the arrogance of missionaries and British colonial discrimination against Buddhism.

The mediator of such "Protestantism" in Sri Lanka was the American convert Henry Steele Olcott (1832–1907), who came to the country and helped activist Buddhist leaders organize their efforts. Olcott emphasized the importance of the laity in revitalization and the founding of Buddhist publications and schools. He also composed a *Buddhist Catechism* (1881) and invented a five-color Buddhist flag, both of which are widely used across the world today. Modern Protestant tendencies were evident in the reformist insistence that spiritual and scientific truth be compatible. Furthermore, the reformers believed—in agreement with the Protestant missionaries—that the practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka had been debased by idolatry, Hindu polytheism, and a corrupt monastic "priesthood." The laity, however, could reestablish "true Buddhism" through adhering to the pure philosophy and meditation practices taught by the human Buddha.

A Sri Lankan protégé, who adopted the name Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), built on Olcott's initiatives, preaching and publishing tracts to spread his vision of revitalized Buddhism. In 1893, Dharmapala addressed an ecumenical conference, the Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago. He impressed conference-goers with his definition of modernist Buddhism as compatible with science, free from dogma and superstition, tolerant of other faiths, and committed to social reform. After Dharmapala founded the Mahabodhi Society in Kolkota, this organization extended "Protestant Buddhist" reform to other countries in Asia.

Dharmapala also found an enthusiastic reception among the Sri Lankan laity, especially the newly educated professional elite and the merchant middle class, who owed their rising positions in the world to the changes wrought by the colonial

modernization of the country. At the same time, Dharmapala energized the Buddhist reformers in Sri Lanka; his speeches and writings also contributed to the linkage between the faith and the nationalist struggles. He celebrated Sri Lanka as a uniquely pure Buddhist country, elevated the Sinhalese ethnic group as a "chosen Buddhist people," and harshly demonized those opposing the country's Buddhist restoration. Scholars today see these influences as having set in motion the cultural forces that have made the postindependence state, Sri Lanka, a zone of bloody conflict and uncompromising reform.

### *Buddhism in the Himalayas: No Shangri-La*

While it is true that Tibetan Buddhist communities have survived in the remote and picturesque settlements nestled among the world's highest mountains, this region has hardly been a utopian zone for Buddhism in the post–World War II era. Along the southern Himalayan region, the isolation of the states on the Tibetan frontier (Ladakh, Sikkim, and Bhutan) enabled them to retain their independence until the end of World War II. Since religious conservatism also kept the monks and leaders of these states isolated from the modern world, there was little impetus for reform or adaptation to the postwar international political order.

In 1949, most of the territories on the Tibetan plateau ruled by the Gelugpa school's Dalai Lama were declared part of the People's Republic of China, which sent its army to enforce this claim. The far peripheries of India and Nepal, once oriented to Lhasa, were isolated from the greater Buddhist centers, while central and western Tibet have been ruled by China as "the Tibetan Autonomous Region" until today. Up to the bitter end of China's Cultural Revolution (1976), all religious practices in the region were repressed, and most Buddhist temples, monasteries, and shrines were destroyed. Thousands of Tibetans have died since 1949 in conflicts that set Chinese against Tibetan, as well as Tibetan against Tibetan. The fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, went into exile in 1959, and 15 percent of the population has left the country as well.

After 1980, official toleration of limited worship and monastic ordination returned, as did state-sponsored rebuilding of select monasteries. But increasing Tibetan protests since 1987 met with further restrictions and arrests, while increasing Chinese migration into the region has reduced Tibetans to a minority in their homeland. Buddhist traditions are slowly being restored, but the Chinese government exerts close supervision of monastic training and ritual practices to ensure they are not perceived as promoting Tibetan independence; the Communist state has already claimed the right to identify legitimate reincarnate lamas, including the next Dalai Lama.

Three nations have remained free refuges of Tibetan Buddhism. Nepal has several million Buddhists among the highland-dwelling Tibeto-Burman peoples, in its settlements of Tibetan refugees, and among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley. Kathmandu is the modern capital of Nepal, and this valley is also Asia's largest

center for international institutions connected with the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Tibetan Buddhism also has survived in mountainous areas of North India (in Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh). India has likewise accepted Tibetan refugees, and since 1959, the Dalai Lama's government in exile has been located in picturesque Dharamsala. Finally, there is Bhutan in the eastern Himalayas, a nation formed in 1907 as the royal kingdom ruled by the Wangchuck family. It is the world's only nation that has Tibetan Buddhism as its state religion.

Most regions where Tibetan Buddhism still flourishes have lost political autonomy. The central, northern, and eastern portions of Tibet were absorbed by China, while Ladakh and Sikkim were absorbed into modern India. Bhutan alone remained independent from India, but only in its internal affairs. In exile and in isolated enclaves, Tibetan Buddhist institutions have sustained the faith, but these Buddhists struggle both as refugees in poverty and as resident aliens within the larger states.

Yet amid the destruction, discrimination, and displacement that came to independent Tibet, there has also been the extensive migration of Tibetan Buddhist teachers into almost every country of the world. While their predecessors were completely out of touch with the modern world and its spiritual challenges, contemporary monk-scholars and meditation teachers are now leaders in "bringing the Dharma to the West." The fourteenth Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1989, is well known as a world leader and is certainly the most recognized Buddhist in the world.

## Theravada Buddhism Today in Southeast Asia

The first regions missionized in antiquity by Buddhist monks have remained the stronghold of Theravada Buddhism. In Sri Lanka and Burma, a new era began with the withdrawal of the British in 1947. Buddhism became a pillar of the new nations' identity, and the Buddha was elevated to the status of cultural hero and ancestor.

While supportive of the respective struggles for independence, Buddhism in these states had also been enriched and enlarged by revival movements throughout the colonial period. Most of these involved the laity in the administration of its institutions and saw the establishment of new monastic schools emphasizing revival through strict discipline, meditation, and social service.

Buddhist leaders in the first decades after World War II were also at the forefront of addressing the relationship between socialism and communism, the political ideologies that had risen as alternatives to capitalism in guiding the newly independent states. Some monks were highly suspicious of communism and allied themselves with aggressive anticommunist campaigns, one going so far as to say that "killing communists entails no demerit"! However, other, more leftist political activists and high civil servants used Buddhist rhetoric quite creatively to justify participation in communist regimes.

## Tobi Fudo: Protector of Airline Passengers

The sword-bearing Fudo, one among a family of wrathful guardian teachers, has long been a protector of Buddhist teachings associated with the tantric school of Japanese Buddhism, Shingon. His dark body and fierce face symbolize his unshakeable devotion to the teachings of the Buddha. Yet his nature is compassionate, as he has vowed to be of service to all beings who call upon him. A legend associated with a Fudo in Shoboin, a temple in old Tokyo, recounts the image flying back to the home temple after a monk had taken it on a pilgrimage. This temple's icon in the Edo period (1600–1868) thus came to be called Tobi (Flying) Fudo. Over the last thirty years, the sangha of this temple has sold *ema* boards like the one pictured here—Fudo with a Boeing 747—to Japanese air travelers, who write their flight numbers on the back and leave it at the temple, requesting protection. Carry-on talismans, called *Hiko-Omamori*, are also sold at the temple.

The adaptation of Fudo to be a protector of air travelers illustrates the social engagement, creativity, and adaptability of Buddhism in Japan today.

### Tooth Relics and Anti-Muslim Riots in Myanmar

The Buddha's cremation relics have always been the most sacred and precious objects for devotees. Not only are they a "sacred trace" of the Buddha's earthly existence, they are also thought to be infused with immense power, and mere proximity to them is believed to confer spiritual and worldly blessings.

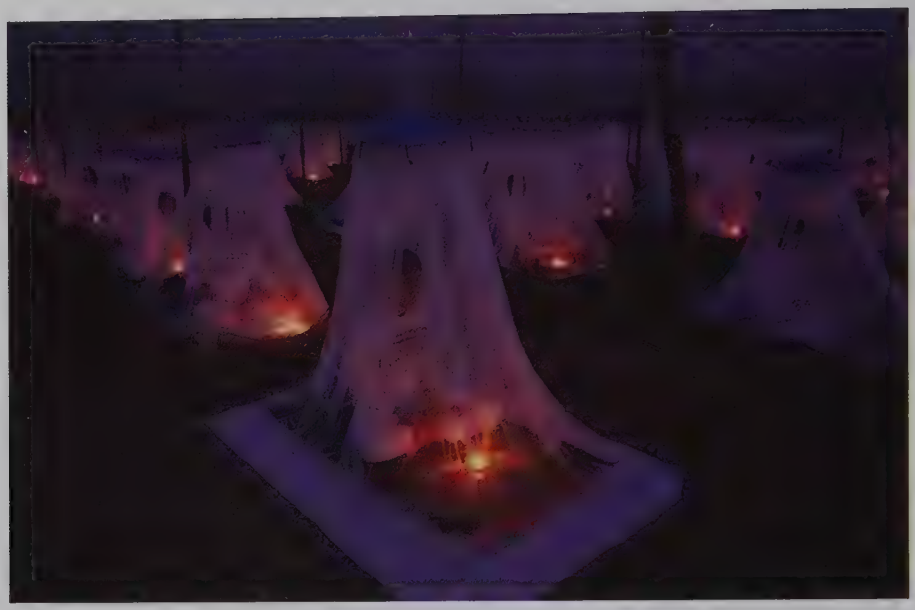
In 1994, and again in 1996 and 2011, the Chinese government loaned a tooth relic to Myanmar. Placed in a jewel-embellished palanquin and conveyed from the Boeing 757 to a silk-draped float pulled by an elephant, the relic was taken to its shrine in the Maha Pasana cave in Rangoon, where over the next six weeks a half-million devotees came to venerate it and make offerings. The country's ruling junta, who had sponsored the visit, used the state-controlled media to emphasize that its members were exemplary Buddhists. In 1995, the junta underwrote the construction of a new temple in the capital where the relic was again displayed in 1996 and 2011. Displaying and respecting Buddha relics have been recognized as signs of just rulers in Buddhist states since antiquity, and the junta's generals no doubt intend their sponsorship of tooth relic veneration to win popular approval and counter dislike of their authoritarian rule.

In 2011, the Buddha's sacred tooth relic was brought from China to Myanmar for the fourth time. Here, security officials and Chinese Buddhist monks accompany the relic as it is transported to the Kabaaye pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar.

In recent years, political changes in Myanmar have revealed long-suppressed resentments felt by the Burmese Buddhist majority on two fronts: against the Christian tribal groups on their northern borders, and toward Muslim citizens called *Rohingyas*, whose ancestors had immigrated from Bangladesh into Myanmar's southwest border region. Claiming that "Myanmar is a Buddhist country" and challenging the Muslim Rohingyas' right to remain within the country's borders, Buddhist mobs have beaten and killed hundreds and driven 700,000 persons into refugee camps inside and out of Myanmar. Since then, the world press has shown unprecedented photos of Buddhist monks organizing rallies and even leading groups intent on expelling Rohingyas. Inspired by newly awakened Buddhist nationalism, some in Myanmar have even threatened those calling for restraint and attempting to apply Buddhist ethics to all sentient beings.

## Three Contemporary Faces of Thai Buddhism

A constitutional monarchy since 1932 and never ruled by a European nation, Thailand is another predominantly Theravada country. Thai society supports traditional and reformist Buddhist scholarship, the ancient spiritual practices of forest monks, and pioneering reformist initiatives. Thai reformers have actively participated in modernization through government development programs in infrastructure building, agricultural innovation, education, and health care. Notable independent monks have opposed the state's toleration of corruption, pollution, and environmental destruction. However, mainstream Thai Buddhist monastic institutions have benefited from



Monastics and householders of the modernist Dhammakaya school reside in individual tents of mosquito netting on a mass meditative retreat in Thailand.

royal patronage and the rising wealth that accompanied the economic boom of the late twentieth century. Certain charismatic monks and a host of new, lay-oriented, independent Buddhist institutions are also active in offering leadership to revitalize the faith. The burgeoning urban areas, where neither old community ties nor traditional monasteries effectively meet the needs of the new city dwellers, have been fertile ground for such reformists. Three examples illustrate the sorts of Buddhist innovators active in contemporary Thailand: the Dhammakaya, Santi Asoke, and the work of two monks, Phra Boonsong and Luang Pi Daeng.

**The Dhammakaya** The Dhammakaya is the fastest-growing Buddhist reform group in Thailand, attracting the well-educated and newly affluent classes as well as the royal family. Founded by the charismatic monk Phra Monghon Thepmuni in 1978, Dhammakaya spreads its teachings and meditation practices through the use of mass media. The movement has established a presence in every major city and town across Thailand, where its very highly educated monks administer a program of rigorous training for the laity. Another binding force of Dhammakaya is Phra Thepmuni's meditation technique, one that has more in common with Mahayana practices of the Himalayas than with traditional Theravada methods. For its followers, the Dhammakaya has reduced the ritual complexity of the traditional monastery to a few simple practices. It has also emphasized that making money is compatible with Buddhism and has translated utopianism and interdependence teachings through the slogan "World Peace Through Inner Peace." As of 2017, the group numbered its supporters at over 1 million, with branches in twenty-four countries.

**Santi Asoke** Santi Asoke differs in many respects from Dhammakaya. It has won a much smaller following (perhaps 87,000, as estimated in 2020) and has garnered much less wealth. Since its founding in 1976, however, movement activists have critiqued what they regard as the complacent, establishment monastic schools' compromises with state and business power. Santi Asoke ("Peaceful Ashoka") is named after the first lay ruler in Buddhist history, the Indian emperor who (in Buddhist accounts) spread the faith across India and ruled according to the Buddha's ethical norms. Accordingly, this group seeks to reform Thai Buddhism through a return to austere ethical practices, such as abstaining from meat, alcohol, and tobacco as well as avoiding gambling and hedonistic entertainment. Santi Asoke grew out of the work of forest monk reformers who in the 1920s and 1930s sought to revitalize the sangha by a return to an ascetic lifestyle for monks, complemented by rigorous meditation schedules. With its base both conservative and rural, its leaders preach the avoidance of "superstitions." Thus, its monasteries have few Buddha images, and no rituals are focused on them. In recent years, Santi Asoke has sought to promote ecological activism and sustainable environmental practices, but it has lost membership due to involvement in the national political tumults that resulted in a military takeover in 2014.

**Phra Boonsong and Luang Pi Daeng** Not all reformers in Thailand have been new institution builders. Phra Boonsong (b. 1941), the abbot of Phranon Wat in central Thailand since 1972, is a dedicated environmentalist. When he arrived in the area, runoff from the Chin River, which flows by the monastery, was polluting rice fields, and declining agriculture and fishing yields were causing men and women to seek employment in the cities. Phra Boonsong worked to improve the region's ecological balance by appealing to the traditional Thai prohibition against killing inside a monastery. He began by declaring the river adjacent to it a "pardon zone" for all water creatures. Next, from profits made by selling fish food to local Buddhists (who in turn gave it to the fish, earning merit), he was able to add fish stock to the river. The fish multiplied in that nearby stretch, increasing the harvest for local fishermen. He also began planting organic orchards and has managed to reduce the use of expensive, watershed-polluting chemicals. The expertise of the Phranon Wat monks in species use, grafting, fertilizers, and marketing is now being shared across Thailand.

Abbot Luang Pi Daeng likewise could not ignore the world outside his monastery, Wat Hua Rin in northern Thailand. His monastery buildings now include medical examination rooms, handicraft production facilities, and a meeting hall where people with HIV/AIDS come for health monitoring and support group meetings. Taking alms from households with an HIV-infected member to illustrate that the disease cannot be transmitted through casual contact, this monk has worked to end the abandonment of those who have contracted this disease. In addition to providing spiritual counseling, Luang Pi Daeng has applied the Buddhist teaching of suffering and interdependence to this crisis that has deeply affected Thai life: Luang Pi Daeng's work was instrumental

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Ghosananda, Witness to Buddhist Peacemaking in Cambodia

Ordained as a young boy in Cambodia, Somdet Phra Ghosananda (1928–2007) pursued a monastic life through middle age, spending years outside of his native land meditating in Thai forest monasteries and completing a doctoral degree in Pali textual studies. In 1976, when Ghosananda heard of Cambodia's political upheaval and the atrocities of Khmer Rouge rule, he resolved to return to worldly action. He left his forest monastery to work in refugee camps along Thailand's Cambodian border, where he built modest monasteries and trained new monks who helped meet the needs of the suffering population.

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Ghosananda returned to Cambodia, where he was named Supreme Monk Patriarch of the country. He was also invited to preach Dharma and teach meditation among Cambodian immigrants in the United States, and during those visits he sought international support for Cambodia's people and to promote anti-landmine activism. While he went on to found over fifty international monasteries, his first priority was to promote peace in Cambodia and foster national reconciliation through Buddhist morality. Although the Khmer Rouge had murdered his entire family and destroyed his native village, Ghosananda never wavered from his conviction: "It is the law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle."

Recognized by the Japanese Niwano Peace Foundation and several times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, this beloved, self-effacing monk, called "Cambodia's Gandhi," gave up the satisfactions of scholarship and the bliss of meditation to take decisive action to heal a genocidal national conflict.

in the establishment of the UNICEF-funded Sangha Metta Project, which has trained over 4,000 monks in seven countries about AIDS prevention and treatment.

### *Buddhist Revival in Postwar Indochina*

By 1985, all the countries of the Indochinese peninsula had begun to liberalize their economies and relax restrictions on religious observances. As communist governments retreated from dogmatism to pragmatism and tolerated the enduring popular attachment to Buddhism and indigenous religions, civil authorities in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia began accepting the place of Buddhism in national culture and politics.

A French colony until 1953, Cambodia suffered through the Vietnam wars with the French and the United States and, in the aftermath (1975–1979), the genocidal conflicts under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot. Under Pol Pot's communist regime, Buddhist monks and institutions were targeted for murder and destruction. While several Cambodian Buddhist centers were relocated among refugees over the border in Thailand, only in 1989 did the restoration of Buddhism begin. Several prominent figures seeking national reconciliation have been Theravada monks.

Vietnam has increasingly tolerated the restoration of Buddhist monasteries and temples since 1975. Nevertheless, the government has imprisoned monks it regards as too involved in politics, and the officially sanctioned (and so-named) Vietnam Buddhist Church has won only minimum popular acceptance. Vietnam's population of 75 million resembles China in its religious orientation, with Buddhism the most widespread tradition and existing alongside Chinese Daoism and Confucianism, indigenous cults, and Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Vietnamese Buddhism today is predominantly Mahayana in the north, with Theravada monasteries found in the south.

The modern state of Indonesia contains the largest Muslim population in the world, though its western islands of Sumatra and Java were once at the center of an empire that supported both Hinduism and Buddhism. Under a constitution that officially protects all faiths, Indonesian Buddhists are a small minority (1 percent of 205 million), but the faith has undergone a vigorous revival since 1950. Small communities dedicated to predominantly Mahayana Buddhism likewise exist among minority ethnic Chinese communities in Malaysia and in Singapore, the city-state that separated from Malaysia in 1965.

## East Asia

Devastated by the destruction of World War II, East Asia embarked on the long road to social, political, and economic recovery after 1945. Communist nations imposed new obstacles for Buddhist adherents and institutions for several decades afterward, but by 2013, only North Korea remained opposed to the tradition's reestablishment across the region. The examples that follow illustrate the remarkable rebound of Buddhist tradition, with followers once again drawing on the great ability of the Dharma to be adapted to changing circumstances and times.

### *Guanyin Rises Again in China*

Mahayana Buddhists have long shared a common faith in Avalokiteshvara, whose shrines are found in almost every settlement and home from central Asia to Japan. As already mentioned, the celestial bodhisattva has come to be called Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan. With Buddhism's missionary transplantation across East Asia, this divinity became the refuge for all who desired rebirth in the western Buddhist paradise, for those who met dangerous life circumstances, and especially for women who wanted safe childbirth and sons. As Daoism organized and was systematized in response to Buddhism in China by the T'ang era (618–907), Guanyin was so popular

(and Daoism so eclectic) that icons of Guanyin were accepted sights in Daoist temples and in clan temples otherwise dedicated to the veneration of ancestors.

The violently iconoclastic phase of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–1969) nearly eliminated Guanyin images from China. Since the mid-1980s, however, Guanyin has returned to favor. Even so, the government's acceptance of the revival of Buddhist devotionalism contrasts to its harsh repression of other faiths that have taken root in China, from Christian sects to the syncretistic Falun Gong (see Chapter 8).

Since the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Communist government of China has slowly allowed many Buddhist institutions to reopen, including monasteries that train monks and nuns in traditional ritual and meditation practices. Augmented by meritorious gifts from Chinese living outside China, Buddhist institutions have been rehabilitated across the nation as the government has ended restrictions on lay devotees' setting up home shrines and undertaking pilgrimages.

### *Buddhist Revival in South Korea*

The formerly unified Korean culture area, artificially split into North Korea and South Korea after World War II, was strongly influenced by Chinese cultural borrowings, including Buddhism, throughout its history. As South Korea experienced rising economic prosperity from the 1970s onward, it attracted patrons and activists who sought to build the spiritual programs of the monasteries, present the Buddha's teachings in modern media, and reverse the slide of Buddhism in the face of Christian proselytizing and government discrimination.

Despite many setbacks over the last century, the surviving Korean Buddhist institutions remain well endowed with landed income and have created an important niche for themselves in Korean society by establishing schools, universities, and lay meditation centers. As in other Buddhist countries undergoing successful economic modernization, Korean Buddhism is experiencing a renewal. Its modern institutions are upgrading monastic education, creating mass media publications and cable networks, and developing an urban, middle-class Buddhist identity based on householder rituals, meditation, and youth organizations.

### *Buddhism in Japan Recovers After World War II*

Japan, like the United States, is a country of ever-broadening religious expression. Buddhism has contributed to this through its classical monastic institutions and by its doctrines providing starting points for many of Japan's "new religions." In the mid-nineteenth century, the Meiji state's ultranationalist governments deliberately weakened Buddhism. By the 1930s, many abbots of co-opted "establishment schools" were in fact actively fanning the flames of war. World War II left monasteries in ruins and prominent clergy in disgrace. After the war, however, the sanghas of the oldest schools retained their nationwide presence under a system of head and branch monasteries developed in the late Tokugawa era (1603–1867), and some communities worked to restore their spiritual integrity. Today, most Japanese families are still registered with a monastery branch of one or the other Buddhist schools for, at the very least, the performance of family death rituals.

## Boke Fuji ("Senility") Kannon: A New Incarnation of a Buddhist Deity

The late 1980s saw the appearance of icons that depicted the goddess Kannon holding a flower in one hand and opening the other in a gesture of mercy to two elderly people, one male and one female, who clutch at her robes in supplication. Consistent with her renown developed over one-and-a-half millennia for compassionately "mothering" her devotees and bestowing worldly boons to those who call on her, this new form of the bodhisattva has arisen as senility or Alzheimer's disease has caused great emotional distress to many in Japan (as elsewhere). Both for the elderly and their families, who share a Confucian responsibility for parental care at this stage of life, the sufferings of old age have surfaced as a weighty problem, suggesting a creative Buddhist response. Thus, temples have established social and spiritual programs, developing amulets, shrines, and pilgrimage routes for devotees to visit in search of preventive blessings. Buddhist priests, aware of physicians' counsel that the best way to keep senility at bay is for the aged to keep active, are encouraging this approach. By organizing pilgrimages, for example, they make available to the elderly enjoyable, stimulating, and hopeful activity, in which the pilgrims can both articulate their worries and acquire peace of mind.

A contemporary Boke Fuji ("Senility") Kannon amulet from Japan.

The great number of individuals undertaking pilgrimage circuits across the heartland of historical Japan to honor the Mahayana bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, here called Kannon, attests to Buddhism's importance today. This "pilgrimage boom," as journalists have labeled the popular religious revival, was aided by the proliferation of modern pilgrim facilities. Scholars debate about how much this rapidly increasing pilgrimage is due to religious dedication to Kannon and how much is merely due to a less pious, "cultural tourism."

A final example of a new form of Kannon devotionalism in Japan is the cult organized to seek the forgiveness of the spirits of stillborn, miscarried, and aborted fetuses (*mizuko*, "water children"). Buddhist temples throughout Japan have seen a revival in rituals on their memorial grounds as women have set up icons to which they offer food and other ritual gifts to the spirits whom they denied birth in human form. Kannon and another compassionate bodhisattva, named Jizo, are popular in this form of worship at many temples. Japanese women typically request that the compassionate deities guard and bless these wandering spirits until they fulfill their destiny and continue on to another human rebirth, as in classical Buddhist teachings.

**mizuko cult:** in Japan, form of Kannon devotionalism that seeks forgiveness from spirits of stillborn, miscarried, and aborted fetuses

This **mizuko cult** has spread widely, promulgated by many temples that not coincidentally benefit from the income derived from the special ritual services they provide.

## Buddhism Today in Diaspora and in Asia

The economic boom beginning in the 1990s and the global migration of Asians are the most recent developments affecting Buddhism today. To a large extent, newly affluent Buddhists have done what Buddhist householders have always done with a portion of their surplus wealth: make merit through pious donations. This infusion of new wealth has been used to rebuild venerable monasteries and temples, support new reform sects, and modernize Buddhist institutions by establishing schools, starting periodicals, and creating mass media outlets. One exception to the trend of new Asian affluence pushing the international expansion of Buddhism is the Tibetan diaspora, which has depended largely on donations by affluent Euro-American supporters, including Hollywood actors and rock stars.

The global migration of Buddhist monastic institutions and ideas has been so great that a representative of every major Asian school can now be found on every continent, and numerous non-Asians have by now been accepted for ordination as monks and nuns in every nation's sangha. In addition, awareness of the basic Buddhist doctrines of karma, nirvana, and Buddhahood, formerly confined to the educated classes of the world, is now accessible to all via the global mass media.

### *Buddhism in the West*

In the Zen and Tibetan schools in North America, especially, converts now speak of the emergence of new American schools of Tibetan (or Zen) Buddhism. Interestingly, these Euro-American Buddhist schools are selective in their adoption of Asian Buddhist traditions: They have eschewed celibate monasticism, featured meditation, and minimized ritualism, much like the "Protestant Buddhists" of Asia. This expectation of Westerners is especially noteworthy in the Pure Land schools established in America: These centers have found the need to offer programs in meditation for the laity, even though back in Asia their monastic life is more focused on chanting.

In the 1950s the perceived iconoclasm of Zen—its nonconformist appeal—attracted Americans who participated in the Beat Generation culture of jazz, poetry, and experimental literature. The lure of Zen meditation practices has drawn Western practitioners from the 1960s onward. Zen's connection with Japanese fine arts and martial arts also helped Zen-oriented teachers and their institutions across the globe to reach a wider artistic and athletic audience.

The Japanese Soka Gakkai, a modern offshoot of the Nichiren school, has an international following eager to reinterpret Buddhism and take political action to foster the development of a more enlightened world civilization. Pure Land Buddhism has been transplanted among East Asians who have migrated to urban areas worldwide, particularly the West Coast of North America and Hawaii. Indeed, migrants from every Buddhist country in the world have contributed to the globalization of their faith by

## Facts Regarding Buddhism in America

Self-identified Buddhists: 1.6 million (0.7%)
Those who report meeting a Buddhist teacher "at least a few times a year": 5 million
Those who practice Buddhist meditation: 6 million
"Nightstand Buddhists" who say they read Buddhist literature: 7 million
Those who report "Buddhism has had an important influence on their thinking about religion or spirituality": 28.3 million

Source: Pew Surveys, 2011–2015.

establishing temples and monasteries in their adopted homelands. The latest groups of Asian Buddhists in America have emigrated from Southeast Asia.

Outside Asia, Buddhists still remain a small minority in the census figures and usually are found in urban areas. Among today's immigrants and Western converts, as in Asia, "being a Buddhist" does not necessarily imply an exclusive identity. Thus, the census figures, which show, for example, roughly a million Buddhists in North America as a whole, do not accurately reflect the penetration of Buddhist concepts and practices in contemporary national culture.

With intellectuals worldwide, however, awareness of Buddhist thought and practice is widespread, though not always to beneficial effect. Advertisers now deploy Buddhist ideas and practices to promote materialistic attachments. Popular advertising since 1999 found the Dalai Lama's image being used to sell Apple computers, a Nike sneaker called "Nirvana," and a designer sandal called "Buddha." Even the word *Zen* has been reduced to a vapid cliché because it has by now been appended to hundreds of objects to elicit consumer curiosity.

### *The Reshaping of Buddhism in Asia*

In the postcolonial period, Buddhists have had to determine how to situate their tradition in the new secular polities. The effort has included reconstructing sangha–state relations after colonial neglect of the religious institutions, responding to scientific thought and modern medicine, reckoning with the religious pluralism introduced by Christianity and other faiths, and revising law codes in relation to national minorities. The results have been mixed. In Bhutan and Sri Lanka, the dominant ethnic groups have promoted Buddhist nationalism at the expense of non-Buddhist minorities, while in Myanmar, members of the military that once used Buddhist symbols to prop up the legitimacy of their authoritarian regimes have more recently used Buddhist monks to promote repressive policies and violence.

As ethnic identity has held the loyalty of local communities, often against the demands of modern secular states, "being Buddhist" has drawn individuals to value, rediscover, and embrace Buddhism across Asia. In many cases, the postcolonial web of global interaction has shaped the process: The "Buddhism" that reformers discover has been filtered through and influenced by the thinking of Euro-American scholars and Westernized indigenous teachers.

## Buddhism as Commodity and Buddhist Imagery as Sales Pitch

Although Zen is not mentioned in it, the ad on the left, for a truck, completely misunderstands the basic message of Buddhism—that possessions and attachment undermine spiritual life. The image on the right makes the equally absurd suggestion that electronic distractions are somehow a kind of spiritual practice.

An interesting and early example of this phenomenon occurred in Maharashtra, the modern state in central India. Since 1956, Mahar caste groups relegated to the bottom of the caste system have held mass ceremonies to convert to Buddhism, declaring their rejection of Hinduism and its institutionalization of social inequality. The Mahars' knowledge of Buddhism was informed in part by colonial scholarship; the presence in Maharashtra of ancient Buddhist sites revealed by British archaeology has obvious importance as well. The founder of this movement, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), learned about Buddhism from his studies in the West, particularly at Columbia University, where Euro-American scholarship on Buddhism then held up the image of the Buddha as a social reformer. Statues of Ambedkar abound in Maharashtra villages today, monuments to the reinstatement of Buddhism tradition in the service of a twentieth-century social reform movement.

### Buddhism's Affinity for Modernization

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Western scholars questioned whether Buddhism could prove compatible with economic modernization. Since the end of World War II, such skepticism has been laid to rest by the exceptional success of

nations strongly influenced by Buddhism. Modern reformers have had many canonical texts to draw on in order to promote the compatibility between economic development and Buddhism. As an influential reformist monk of Thailand asserted several generations ago, "Education breeds knowledge, knowledge breeds work, work breeds wealth, and wealth promotes happiness."[6]

The economic boom in Asia since World War II has clearly benefited Buddhism as newly wealthy patrons have sponsored various renewal initiatives. Moreover, many do not involve the traditional sangha's leadership. For example, translation of the sacred texts into the global medium of English is emphasized across the world. The Buddhist Publication Society, founded in Sri Lanka in 1956, has offered hundreds of vernacular (and English) translations and interpretive tracts; its work overlaps with that of the Pali Text Society, a group founded in the nineteenth century that publishes scholarly translations of canonical works, including extra-canonical commentaries. Today, each of the four Tibetan monastic schools also has a modern publishing house in the West that annually prints dozens of texts promulgating translations and thematic explanations of Buddhist doctrine by its own monk-scholars. An even larger-scale project was initiated in 1991 by the Japanese industrialist Yenan Numata. His foundation, the Bukkyo Denko Kyokai, is underwriting the scholarly translation into English of the entire Chinese canon. To do all 3,360 scriptures, the project is estimated to span the next 100 years!

## Socially Engaged Buddhism: Some Examples

Thai activist Sulak Sivaraksa puts the ancient Buddhist concept of suffering into the framework of today's world:

> In Buddhist terminology, the world is full of *duhkha* ["suffering"], i.e., the dangers of impending world destruction through nuclear weapons, atomic fallout, air, land, and sea pollution, population explosion, exploitation of fellow human beings, denial of basic human rights, and devastating famine. . . . World duhkha is too immense for any country, people, or religion to solve. We can only save ourselves when all humanity recognizes that every problem on earth is our own personal problem and our own personal responsibility. . . . The language of Buddhism must offer answers which fit our situation. Only then will Buddhism survive, today and tomorrow, as it has in the past, influencing humankind positively and generating love, peace, and nonviolence.[7]

An even more forceful exhortation is provided by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh:

> The word *Buddha* comes from the root *budh*, which means "awake." A Buddha is one who is awake. Are we really awake in our daily lives? That is a question. . . . Society makes it difficult to be awake. We know that 40,000 children in the Third World die every day of hunger, but we keep forgetting. The kind of society we live in makes us forgetful. That is why we need exercises in mindfulness. . . . Our earth is like a small boat. Compared with the rest of the cosmos, it is a very small boat, and it is in danger of sinking. We need a person to inspire us with calm confidence, to tell us what to do. Who is that person? The Mahayana texts tell us that you are that person.[8]

## The Sangha: Adaptive Reformism?

Given the role of the sangha in maintaining the traditional goals in every society, the future of Buddhism is in the hands of the monks and nuns who will become the spiritual exemplars, scholars, teachers, and meditators. And arguing that the sangha cannot keep Buddhism alive unless the monks keep pace with the educational level of the nation's population, countries such as Thailand have invested in making higher education available to them. This opportunity still attracts many young men from poor rural backgrounds to take ordination. Becoming a monk gives many the chance to live in better material circumstances than their parents could achieve and to gain skills that can be, and often are, taken back into lay life.

At the same time, many Asian states have created national sangha bureaucracies, placing monastics under political supervision. These governments now scrutinize the preaching and personal lives of monks and crack down on any political activities that might arise in the monasteries. Seeing clearly the threat that the Buddhist Dharma represents to unjust or uncompassionate regimes, politicians have sought to weaken Buddhist institutions even while outwardly honoring them. In recent years, monks in Tibet and Vietnam have felt incidents of stern repression. It is hard to imagine Buddhist monks regaining the power they once enjoyed in the premodern era.

Since World War II, many developments have undermined the classical patterns and exchanges within Buddhist societies. Whereas monastic schools formerly were an important part of the sanghas' service to local communities and a source of their recruitment, today public education has been removed from the monastery almost everywhere. In Japan, Buddhist schools struggle with the loss of support due to the depopulation of the rural areas, and many leaders in the sangha across the country are experimenting with new ways of reaching citizens and utilizing monasteries to serve the common good. But if connection with and awareness of modern changes are essential to an institution meeting the needs of the lay majority, many question whether the Buddhist sangha today is capable of keeping Buddhist ideas and identity vibrant in the whirl of changes sweeping modern Asian societies.

Many progressive Buddhists think not. Noting that the modern sangha has a hierarchy of authority unknown in earlier times, they see little opportunity for young monks to fashion innovative applications of the Dharma in thought or action. Noting how powerful elder monks typically lack vision, purpose, or inspiration beyond the guardianship of ceremonies and tradition, many Asian householders now look to lay institutions for more promising avenues to keep Buddhism vital.

The number of men taking monastic vows across Asia has fallen far short of what population increases would predict. As a result, many village monasteries are understaffed, a trend reflecting the breakdown of rural communities that has contributed to the urbanization of Asia. Buddhists in Nepal, Tibet, Korea, and Japan have supported sanghas of the "married ordained" to solve the problem of recruitment, and some of these schools have shown recent inclinations to revitalize the practices and innovate in the uses of their monasteries. Still, Buddhist reformers have also gone outside

the boundary of the modern sangha to move ahead with their revitalization programs, founding new organizations. Some of these have faced opposition from the established monastic communities. Most striking have been innovators in Japan, where in recent years married sangha leaders have emerged to found a new movement called "Experimental Buddhism." Faced with declining patrons and financial patronage, some have successfully found new missions for monasteries (theaters, community meeting centers, and fitness centers) and new uses for monastic resources (setting up counseling centers and even bars, where Buddhist doctrine can be discussed).

A Thai monk at an ATM in Bangkok. Monks across Asia face the challenge of adapting their lifestyle, defined by monastic laws over 2,000 years old, to the rapidly changing realities of the globalizing world.

## State Buddhism and the Poison of Ethnic Passion

With almost all Buddhist kings and colonialism now gone, shifts in the political, socioeconomic, and intellectual spheres have changed individuals and caused Buddhists to adapt their beliefs and practices to a transformed world. Countries with Buddhist majorities now must decide how to shape society—in economic and political spheres—to best realize the Buddha's ideal of a compassionate civilization. Exponents still debate whether Buddhism should endorse military authoritarianism (on the model of the benevolent dictator Ashoka) or representative democracy (on the model of the sangha's democratic norms). Is it more compassionate to establish a "pure Buddhist state" that privileges Buddhism and Buddhists or to opt for a secular state that guarantees even-handed tolerance of a multireligious and multiethnic society? Can Buddhist ideals be more effectively implemented in a socialist or a free-market system?

As we have seen, in countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka, when "political monks" have gathered attention and public support, they have stoked an uncompromising Buddhist nationalism that targets minority ethnic groups of other faiths. In modern China and Vietnam, Buddhist monks are still called on to withdraw, study, and meditate. In India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, on the other hand, monks have become leaders in political reform movements and in the implementation of economic development projects.

In Sri Lanka, once the nationalistic Buddhist movements had ushered in independence, they turned their efforts inward. By seeking to legislate a "purer Buddhist

## CONTRASTING RELIGIOUS VISIONS

As the following contrasting visions indicate, every religious tradition is capable of generating both visions that encourage peace and understanding and visions that encourage conflict and violence.

### Peacemaker: Thich Nhat Hanh

Since his early involvement with the peace movement in his native Vietnam, the Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926) has projected a strong and ecumenical Buddhist voice. From exile in the West, he has been a firm advocate of toleration and the centrality of peacemaking when facing both personal challenges and international policy. A leading advocate of "engaged Buddhism" and author of several dozen books, Nhat Hahn has for decades argued that Buddhists must participate in social and cultural activities, with activism informed by the clarity arising from meditation. As he once affirmed, "In times like this, when people suffer so much, the bodhisattvas don't stay in the temple; they are out there."[9] His "12 Precepts of the Order of Inter-being" attempts to express universal principles of life beyond Buddhist sectarianism, rejecting absolutely killing, coercion, dogmatism, and untruthfulness while advocating a meditation-centered life.

Buddhist monks at a mass merit and blessings ceremony for Sri Lankan soldiers.

### Confrontationalist: Political Monks of Sri Lanka's Maha Sangha

Drawing on some of the nationalist pronouncements of reformists such as Anagarika Dharmapala, some monks have formed an entity called the Maha Sangha ("Great Community") to engage in political action. These activist monks have urged their government to reply with relentless military action, not negotiated compromise, to resolve the Tamil revolt that has fueled Sri Lanka's tragic civil war since 1983. Citing the Maha Sangha argument that "politics is the monks' heritage," another Buddhist nationalist group, the Bodu Bala Sena ("Army of Buddhist Power"), after the end of the civil war in 2009 began targeting the substantial Muslim minority scattered across Sri Lanka for criticism as anti-national and anti-Buddhist. In 2013, this group launched a campaign of violent repression calling for the boycott of halal-certified meat; scores of Muslim shops, businesses, and places of worship were vandalized by mobs led by Buddhist monks. As one Buddhist nationalist poet wrote to galvanize support for anti-minority aggression:

My brave, brilliant soldier son
Leaving [home] to defend the motherland
That act of merit is enough
To reach Nirvana in a future birth. . . .
Country, religion, race are my triple gems. . . .
The sangha is ever ready
At the front
If the race is threatened.[10]

Tibetan monks engaging in debate training, testing their ability to consistently expound the Buddha's teachings.

A monk from the Ravana Balaya, a Buddhist nationalist group that claims a sacred duty to safeguard Sri Lanka from "minority or outside influences," as he addresses the media during a 2013 protest in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

state" and a restoration of past glories, they created an environment in which activist monks inflamed unprecedented ethnic conflict with non-Buddhist minorities long resident on the island. Paradoxically, Buddhist universalism and the ideology of compassion have not prevented modern attempts at "ethnic cleansing," either in Sri Lanka or in Burma and Bhutan. Some social historians see the further weakening of Buddhist ethics in the future: As populations rise and resources grow scarcer, politicians of Buddhist Asia, as elsewhere, will be increasingly tempted to use Buddhism to unify majorities in order to win votes and take power, inviting possible discrimination against non-Buddhists. From 2007 until today, for example, Thai Buddhist monks have called for declaring Buddhism the official religion of the nation, in response to Muslim terrorist acts in its southern region that murdered monks and destroyed Buddhist sanctuaries.

## Conclusion

As a refuge of intellectual freedom and spiritual imagination, Buddhist teachers nurtured and enriched the civilizations of Asia. Surveying the belief patterns of the world's Buddhist communities, one is challenged both by the sheer diversity of doctrinal expression and by the complexity of Buddhism's systematic thought. In becoming a world religion, Buddhism in practice has promoted compassionate, medically advanced, disciplined, mercantile, and literate societies. And like other great religions today, Buddhism has shown that its definition of the human condition and its prescribed ways of addressing suffering and mortality have enduring value, even in new societies and in the midst of changes that have shaken the modern and postcolonial world.

The global migration of Asian Buddhists during the postcolonial era is an important source of global revival in the twenty-first century. As these groups grow and prosper in their new countries, they naturally channel a portion of their savings back to the home region. But these immigrants have also paid to sponsor monks and build storefront monasteries in the West and, in the process, internationalized the home country's institutions through a slow, grassroots process of development. As Buddhist priests, monks, and expatriates move between their new and old countries, and from rural circumstances to urban living, innovations and resources are being shifted as well. This immigrant-induced exchange also includes the cross-fertilization of ideas moving between Buddhist schools from distant areas of Asia and their Western exponents. It may well be that the future success—and perhaps even survival—of the modern national lineages and schools of Buddhism back in Asia will depend on an international membership, providing worldwide sources of funding and interpretive awareness.

An especially promising development may be the growing presence of Buddhism in the emerging global culture. In the area of human rights, Asian Buddhist exponents

have made impressive contributions. Buddhist doctrine offers many traditional ideals that have inspired reformers and activists who style themselves as "engaged Buddhists." There is no shortage of examples today of the existential "poisons" that Buddhists have always located at the center of their wheel of life—human greed, anger, and delusion. And new poisons have been churned up in Buddhist countries themselves. Yet the very compassion and selflessness that Buddhists have always embraced as central to their tradition offer the means to lessen the suffering of individuals, communities, and even the earth itself.

Members of the Thai sangha gather for chanting before a large Buddha in Bangkok.

The late Gene Smith (at right), preserver of thousands of texts brought out of Tibet by refugees, presenting a gift of a hard drive containing thousands of sacred texts to a Tibetan Buddhist abbot. He made similar donations across the Tibetan world in 2008–2009.

Engaged Buddhism is uniting Asian Buddhists with Western converts, bringing together the energies of householders, monks, and nuns and finding issues that connect Buddhist activists with similarly committed reformers from other faiths. It remains to be seen whether Buddhist revivalists can offer a compelling interpretation of the Dharma as Buddhists find themselves drawn into the marketplace of globalized capitalism, with its doctrines of individualism and competition and its vigorous encouragement of consumerism.

## Discussion Questions

1. Pick three major episodes in the Buddha's life and discuss what lessons they impart to a typical Buddhist householder.
2. In what senses can the Buddha be called the Great Physician?

3. Many modern Buddhists regard the Buddha as a reformer. What teachings can be used to support this interpretation? What historical arguments can be made against this position?
4. Which of the Buddha's teachings are shared with post-Vedic Hinduism?
5. Explain how Buddhist doctrine can argue for reincarnation but against the existence of an "immortal soul."
6. Why is compassion a human ideal that is a logical extension of core Buddhist doctrines?
7. Why is Buddhism known as the Middle Way? Give at least three reasons.
8. Support or critique the statement "Vajrayana Buddhism is a school of Mahayana Buddhism."
9. Discuss the state of Buddhism across Asia in the year 750.
10. Why is the *Lotus Sutra* so important in China and Japan?
11. How does popular Mahayana Buddhism resemble and differ from devotional Hinduism?
12. How is the Mahar revival of Buddhism in India indicative of the effects of "Protestant Buddhism" and the backlash from the colonial era within the Buddhist world?
13. Name five aspects of Protestant Christianity that were adopted by Buddhist reformers, shaping the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revitalization movements called "Protestant Buddhism."
14. In your opinion, how would a modern revivalist present the Dharma and argue that Buddhism remains a religion relevant to life in the twenty-first century?
15. Why might there be so many similarities in the biography of the Jain religion founder Mahavira (see Chapter 6) and the Buddha?

## Key Terms

Amitabha/Amida
anatman
arhats
Ashoka
Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin
bhikshu
bhikshuni
bodhisattva
Buddha-nature school
caitya
Ch'an
Cittamatra
dana
dependent origination
Dharma
Dogen
Eightfold Path
Eisai
engaged Buddhism
enlightenment
Four Conditions
Four Good Deeds
Four Noble Truths
Gandhara
Gelugpa
karuna
koans
*Lotus Sutra*
Madhyamaka
Mahayana
Maitreya/Mi-lo Fo
maitri
mizuko cult
Nagarjuna
Nembutsu

*(continued)*

## Key Terms (continued)

Nichiren
nirvana
Pali Canon
pap
prajna
Protestant Buddhism
punya
Pure Land
samsara
sangha
shramanas
shunya
skandha
Sthaviravadins
stupas
Theravada
Three Marks of Existence
Three Refuges
Vajrayana/Thunderbolt Vehicle
vipassana meditation
Wu Tai Shan
Zen

## Suggested Readings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## Additional Resources

BBC Religion: Buddhism (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism). Reliable information and updated links to sites with basic information.

BuddhaNet (www.buddhanet.net). Gateway to sources of scholarly information and current events in the Buddhist world.

Buddhist Studies, The World Wide Web Virtual Library (www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Buddhism.html). A directory of websites across the Buddhist world.

## Notes

1. Venerable Pannyavaro, "Should Monks Surf the Internet," *BuddhaNet*, January 17, 2017, http://www.buddhanet.net/mag_surf.htm
2. *Samyutta Nikaya* (1, 8)
3. Patrul Rimpoche, *Words of My Perfect Teacher* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 209–210.
4. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, trans. The Bodhicaryavatara by Shantideva (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 20–21.
5. In David Snellgrove, *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2012), 108.
6. Phra Kummsaen, quoted in Kenneth Landon, *Thailand in Transition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), pp. 67–68.
7. Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism in a World of Change," in Fred Eppsteiner, ed., *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), pp. 16–17.
8. Thich Nhat Hanh, "Call Me by My True Name," in Eppsteiner, *The Path of Compassion*, pp. 34–37.
9. Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1996), p. 351.
10. H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 272–273.

# 8

# EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS

## Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto, Buddhism

## Overview

On days considered favorable for approaching the gods, temples in China, Japan, and Korea are packed with morning visitors. In Beijing, newly married couples flock to the White Clouds Daoist temple to light candles, requesting divine aid to ensure the birth of a son. At family shrines in Seoul, students approach ancestral altars to report their applications to study at universities abroad. And in rural Japan, farmers gather to give thanks at the village Shinto shrine for the annual harvest festival. Buddhist monasteries have also attracted new patronage as economic prosperity has enriched the region.

Today in China, public shrines for the sage Confucius are thriving. The Confucian emphasis on education, strong families, individual discipline, and harmonious group relations is seen as holding the center of East Asia's stable societies and contributing greatly to this region's ascendancy in the global economy. One of the main goals of this chapter is to have the reader understand the Confucian world, in East Asia and beyond. Another is to understand how the Chinese emphasis on harmony was extended to "the unity of the three faiths" (*san-jiao heyi*, still a widely used phrase), meaning Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

◀ A Japanese woman makes offerings to her recently departed father at a gravesite located in a Buddhist monastery in Tokyo.

# East Asian Religions Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 1766–1122 BCE | Shang dynasty in China; cult of departed ancestors and oracle bone divination |
| 1122–221 | Zhou dynasty in China; yin-yang theory develops; era of intermittent civil disorder |
| 551–479 | Life of Master K'ung (Confucius) |
| ca. 520–286 | Era of first Daoist sages, philosophers Lao Zi (d. 500 BCE?) and Zhuang Zi (365–290 BCE) |
| 450–223 | Era of Confucian sage scholars, Master Meng (Mencius, 371–289 BCE), Master Xun (298–238 BCE); origins of Confucian *Analects* and compilation of the Five Classics |
| 221–206 | Qin dynasty, the first to unify China; Great Wall completed |
| 206 BCE–220 CE | Han dynasty in China; civil service positions based on mastery of Confucian teachings |
| 220–588 CE | Period of weak regional states and growth of Daoism and Buddhism |
| 618–907 | T'ang dynasty in China; period of Confucian revival; translations of Indian Buddhist texts |
| 668–918 | Silla dynasty in Korea, centered on Buddhism as state religion |
| 710–784 | Nara period in Japan: Shinto tradition organized, Buddhism made state religion |
| 794–1185 | Heian period in Japan, ends with emperor removed from rulership |
| 918–1392 | Koryo dynasty in Korea, with ecumenical development of Mahayana Buddhism |
| 960–1279 | Song dynasty in China; period of neo-Confucianism (the "Second Epoch") |
| 1130–1200 | Life of Zhu Xi, leading neo-Confucian exponent, who reestablished the tradition as preeminent among the Chinese literati |
| ca. 1150–Present | Goddess Mazu becomes popular in China, recognized by the state |
| 1185–1333 | Kamakura era in Japan, era of civil disorder and the rise of new Buddhist schools |
| 1279–1368 | Yuan dynasty in China, era of Mongol rule |
| 1336–1600 | Era of rule by Shoguns: Shinto-Buddhist syncretism, popularity of Pure Land Buddhism; adoption of Zen among the literati and samurai |
| 1368–1644 | Ming dynasty in China, the last era of Han Chinese rule; popularity of doctrines harmonizing the "three faiths" |
| 1380–ff. | In China, *The Canonization of the Gods* fixes folk pantheon in hierarchy mirroring state bureaucracy |
| 1392–1910 | Yi dynasty in Korea, an era marked by state-favored Confucianism |
| 1472–1529 | Life of Wang Yangming, a neo-Confucian who promoted mind cultivation and character development |
| 1501–1570 | Life of Yi T'oegye, important Korean neo-Confucian |
| 1534–1582 | Life of Nobunaga, Japanese shogun who persecuted Buddhism and gave support to Christianity |
| 1592 | Publication of *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Chengen |
| 1600–1868 | Tokugawa era in Japan, with new capital in Tokyo; Buddhism under strong state support |
| 1644–1911 | Qing (Manchu) dynasty in China; era promoting Confucianism |
| 1815–1888 | Oldest "new religions" in Japan: Kurozumikyo (1814), Tenrikyo (1838) |
| 1850–1864 | Taiping Rebellion in China, led by Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1860 | Ch'ondogyo movement founded in Korea by Ch'oe Suun (1824–1864) |
| 1868–1945 | Return of emperor's rule in Japan and rise of state Shinto; Japan adopts Western calendar, technology, imperialist political views |
| 1871–1945 | Japanese Buddhist establishment joins Shinto nationalists and Christians supporting militarism |
| 1880–Present | Best and brightest individuals across East Asia studying Western learning, technology to seek rapid modernization |
| 1889–1890 | New constitution (1889) and Japanese government initiatives draw heavily on Confucian doctrines |
| 1900–1945 | Founding of "new religions" in prewar Japan: Perfect Liberty Kyodan in 1924, Reiyukai Kyodan in 1925, Soka Gakkai in 1930, Rissho Koseikai in 1938 |
| 1912 | Fall of Qing dynasty in China, ending state patronage of Confucianism |
| 1946–Present | Founding of "new 'new religions'" in postwar Japan: Sukyo Mahikari in 1963, Agonshu in 1971, Aum Shinrikyo in 1989 |
| 1949 | People's Republic of China established |
| 1950–1976 | Tibet annexed by China (1950); Communist Party diminishes monks, priests, religious institutions |
| 1966–1976 | Cultural Revolution attacks the "Four Old Things": thought, culture, customs, habits |
| 1982–Present | Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples reopen in China |
| 1994 | Study of Confucianism in schools officially approved by Chinese state |
| 1995 | Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan launches poison gas attack in Tokyo |
| 1996–Present | Images of Mao Zedong and other deceased Communist Party leaders found on popular religious amulets |
| 1999 | Falun Gong, a syncretistic Buddhist–Daoist group founded by Li Hongzhi; Chinese government bans the group and begins persecution of practitioners |
| 2007 | Chinese government begins funding of the first of 500 "Confucius Institutes" across the world to promote the study of Chinese language and culture |
| 2008 | Chinese government declares Qing Ming, "Grave Sweeping Day," an official holiday |
| 2010 | Communist Party officially celebrates Confucius' birthday; places image of Confucius in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, then removes it a few months later |
| 2011 | "Triple Disaster" in Japan (earthquake, tsunami, nuclear meltdown) wreaks destruction, moves Buddhist organizations to myriad service initiatives |
| 2013 | China: Communist Party passes law requiring children to show filial piety to their parents through visits and calls |
| 2017 | Half a billion Chinese counted participating in Confucian grave visits and ritualism on Qing Ming |
| 2018–Present | Chinese actions against Muslims in western provinces include "reeducation camps" |
| 2020 | China Communist Party moves against "excess commercialism" by Daoist and Buddhist institutions |

Interreligious pluralism defines East Asia. Throughout the region's history, the great majority of East Asians regarded Confucianism, Daoism, deity cults, shamanism, and Buddhism as complementary. This also applies to Japan, between Buddhism and its indigenous religion, Shinto, and to Korea, with Christianity and shamanism. Most felt that these interrelated beliefs and practices enriched their spirituality. It was rare for individuals—whether elite or common folk—to feel that "being religious" meant choosing one religious tradition to the exclusion of the others. This openness stands in contrast to the common Western belief that religious conviction means adopting one creed and forsaking all others.

The religions of East Asia today find their common roots in the veneration of ancestors dating back to earliest antiquity. Over time, these practices became blended with basic elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, comprising East Asia's **diffuse religion**. Given that roughly 30 percent of humanity is East Asian, no full reckoning of human religious life can be made without taking into account China, Korea, and Japan.

**diffuse religion:** spiritual tradition centered on family and locality, informed by common ideas from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

A brief review of the region's geography will help us understand this pattern of cultural diffusion. What is today referred to as "China" is the People's Republic of China (PRC). With more than 1.4 billion citizens, it is the country with the largest population in the world. Although spoken Chinese contains over twenty major dialects, the literate culture of China has used the same written language for more than 2,000 years. This has made the classical literary tradition (including all religious texts) accessible to the learned throughout the entire East Asian region. The island of Taiwan has remained as a separate democratic nation since 1949, although its autonomy is unaccepted by the PRC when the Communist Party came to rule mainland China. Traditional Chinese religions endure there, as do new, vital international Buddhist institutions.

China has been the center of the East Asian region from earliest antiquity. The emergence of a central state there predates the unification of Korea and Japan by at least twelve and fifteen centuries, respectively. Most modern national boundaries that demarcate the region date back to the premodern era. The two Koreas, the region of Tibet, and the republic of Taiwan are exceptions.

In very broad terms, all regions beyond China's early core can be seen as the periphery of Chinese civilization, where states and individuals adapted the essential Chinese cultural forms. These forms include the fundamental material technologies needed for subsistence (intensive rice production, the making of iron, and porcelain pottery), the written Chinese characters used to record the spoken languages, and the beliefs and practices of its great religious traditions. In every East Asian country today, most people maintain traditions of remembering and venerating their ancestors at graves, temples, and family altars.

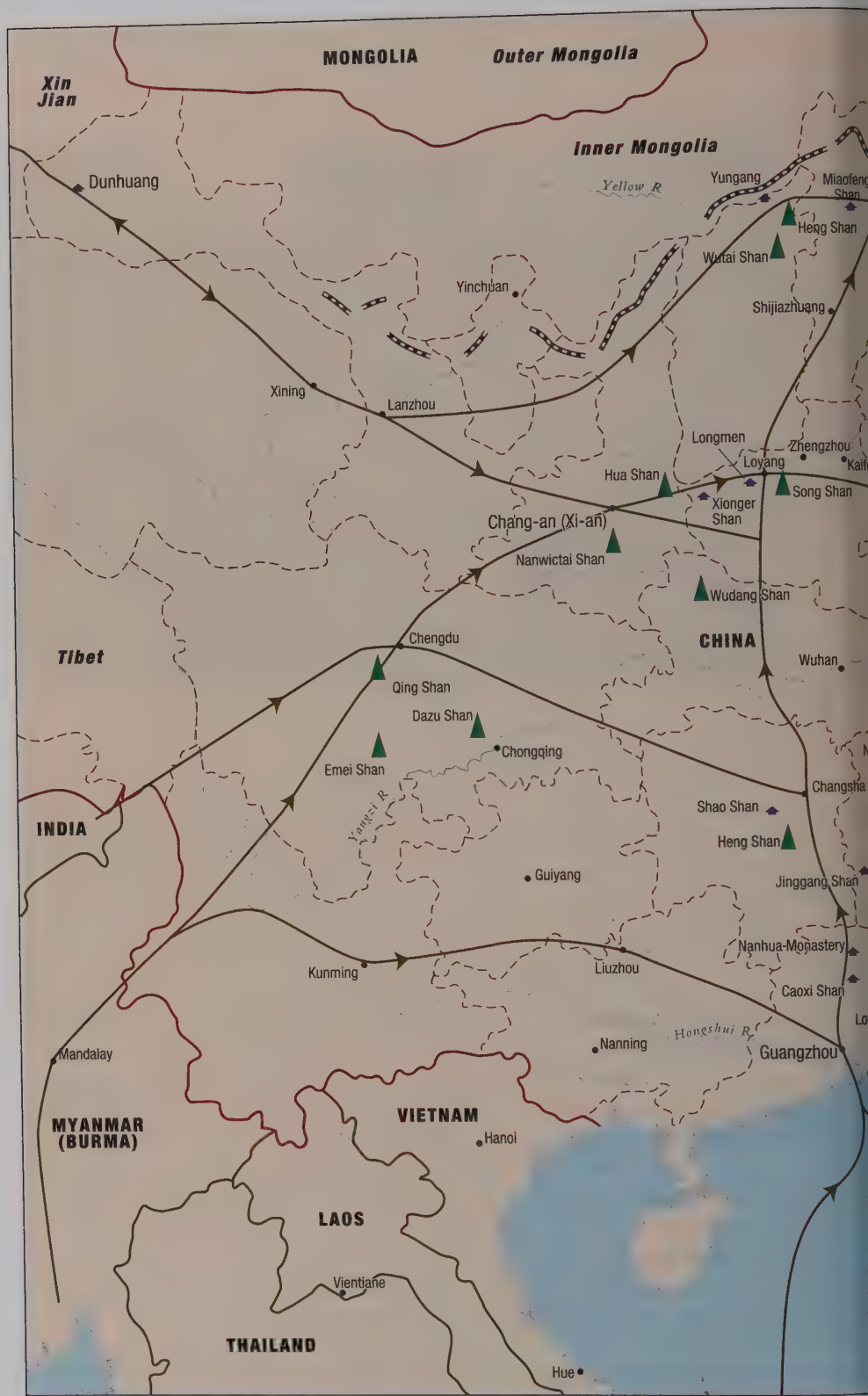
Yet despite the overwhelming influence of Chinese culture and power of the Chinese states, Korean, Japanese, and at times, Vietnamese peoples preserved their own separate identities. While importing and synthesizing much from China, each nonetheless developed a distinct spoken language, mythology, and spiritual connection to its own territory. In all these periphery states, too, the national cultures inspired

At a shrine atop the sacred mountain Tai Shan in southern China, devotees light incense and candles to honor the local gods. People hang heart-linking locks, hoping to secure the safety and happiness of their family members.

people to identify with being culturally and politically separate from China, however much their elites admired some traditions in Chinese culture.

The formerly unified Korean culture area, artificially split into the separate countries of North Korea and South Korea since the end of the Second World War (1945), was most strongly influenced by Chinese cultural borrowings, including Buddhism. In the early modern period until the end of the Yi dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism was the state religion, and ancestor worship was central. Among South Korea's 48 million people, shamanic traditions today are stronger than elsewhere in East Asia, and they are practiced by most individuals regardless of any other religious affiliation. Little traditional religious activity is sanctioned or reported among the 24 million people of the modern isolationist and communist state of North Korea.

China also influenced religion in Japan, but began to do so later than in Korea. Japan never established Daoist institutions, temples devoted to Confucius, or a state bureaucracy administered by men versed in Confucian tradition, but most doctrines from these Chinese traditions were transmitted there. These included yin-yang theory, medical principles, and geomancy from Daoism; ethical norms, political theory, and ancestor rituals were imported from Confucianism. Now a constitutional monarchy with all power vested in a parliament and prime minister, Japan had for fifteen centuries been ruled by an emperor and a single imperial line claiming mythological origins. Since the end of World War II, however, Japan's 125 million people have produced the world's third-largest national economy. As elsewhere, this rapid transition has worked in contradictory directions, increasing the wealth of devotees of




Map 8.1 Modern political map of China, Japan, and North and South Korea showing important religious s

Manchuria
Shenyang
NORTH KOREA
SEA OF JAPAN
JAPAN
Kumgangsan
Pyongyang
Tokyo
Kamakura
Fuji
Dalian
Seoul
Kyoto
Nara
Tenri
Ise
Yantai
SOUTH KOREA
Izumo
Tóngdo-Sa
Hiroshima
Kwangji
Nagasaki
Amaterasu Jinja
Suzhou
Shanghai
Upper Tianzhu Monastery
Hangzhou
Putuo Shan
Ninpo
AyuWang Monastery
Tiantai Shan
PACIFIC OCEAN
Fuzhou
Taipei
TAIWAN
PHILIPPINES
0
500 miles
0
500 kilometers
City, town
Temple
Shinto shrine
The Buddhist Mountains & the Sacred Peaks
River
Grand Canal
Great Wall
Provincial boundary
Boundary of China
Major trade routes during the Tang Dynasty

every persuasion who, in turn, have rebuilt institutions and created new religious organizations, as its society changed profoundly. This explains why, both here and across East Asia, thousands of "new religions" have sprung up, offering creative spiritual responses to life in today's fast-moving societies.

Because of the profound changes that have swept modern China, many religious beliefs and practices originally from China are now best preserved in Korea or Japan. And despite long-standing cultural ties connecting East Asian peoples, the modern era was marked by many conflicts between these nations, ranging from colonization and warfare to genocide.

## Encounter with Modernity: The Fall and Return of Confucianism

Since the mid-nineteenth century, indigenous intellectuals and reformers blamed the religion of Confucianism for East Asia's decadence and failure to defend itself against the imperialist West. In fact, all the region's social and political problems were blamed on adherence to outdated Confucian ideals and the dead weight of decadent practices. Reformers argued that the more quickly Confucianism could be abandoned in favor of Western cultural borrowings, the sooner East Asia would be on the road to prosperity. For this reason, many welcomed the fall of the Chinese (1910) and Korean (1912) imperial states and, with them, the domination of Confucian officials and intellectuals.

By 1980, it was clear that those who had predicted the decline of religion with the advent of science were incorrect, and this was especially the case in East Asia. Not only has religion in East Asia survived, it has revived and expanded. For example, some observers once attributed Japan's prosperity after World War II to its successful Westernization. Although the war destroyed many of Japan's material accomplishments through the country's first era of modernization (1868–1945), the Japanese after World War II were still able to rebuild what is today one of the world's strongest economies. Scholars now see the success of Japan as the result of much more than its early Westernization: Leaders in the Meiji era (1868–1912) facilitated the region's first union of Western technology with reformed Confucian social policy. Similar developments occurred in postwar South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore and are now well-established in post-Mao mainland China. Thus, we now find many scholars attributing the East Asians' success to the region's family-centered "bourgeois Confucianism" (as distinguished from the "high Confucianism" of the former imperial ruling elite).

The East Asian revival has also been realized in each instance by a strong post–World War II state that defines its duty in terms of providing leadership for national economic prosperity and takes responsibility for managing the nation's collective well-being. This recent reinvention of Confucianism has produced societies that today have low crime rates, good social harmony, and efficient economic behavior.

Given the disastrous state of the region right after World War II, the overall accomplishment has been called an "economic miracle."

Now what earlier reformers had identified as Confucianism's intractable flaws have been reanalyzed in positive terms: Family-based businesses efficiently maximize scarce capital; tightly woven kin/family relations are excellent building blocks for supply and product distribution; an education system that fosters group cooperation, memorization, and imitation produces individuals able to work hard and master math, science, and technology. With strong states dedicated to achieving collective economic success, it was clear by 1990 that East Asian peoples with this reformed Confucian orientation had created successful twenty-first-century societies. Thus, after East Asians had acquired Western technological know-how, they effectively drew on Confucian elements in their cultures to mobilize indigenous social resources; they also created political systems that ensured the social cohesiveness needed to promote national prosperity.

East Asia's success calls into question another former tenet of modernity theory: Must all nations follow the Western model to succeed in the twenty-first century? Or is the Confucian route through strong authoritarian states an alternative for Asia, heralding what might be termed a "Third Confucian Epoch"? To understand better the ideas underlying this encounter with modernity today, we must trace the historical development of religion in East Asia.

## East Asian Religions in the Formative Era (1500 BCE–617 CE)

In East Asia, many beliefs and practices documented from earliest antiquity survive up to the present. An example of this conservatism is the deities worshipped by China's imperial court: A list of the gods receiving sacrifices from the last Qing emperor in 1907 matches *exactly* the gods mentioned in a record from 3,000 years ago, with the sole exception of Confucius (who lived almost 600 years after the Shang court). A survey of the early development of Chinese religions demonstrates the pivotal importance of religion in Chinese civilization and how Chinese religious beliefs and practices spread to other East Asian societies.

### Earliest History: Shang (1766–1122 BCE)

In the fertile valleys of the Yellow River, urban societies formed by 2000 BCE. They developed metal technologies, a pictographic writing system, and religious practices. All three of these aspects of civilization are connected in the practice of oracle bone divination, which was discovered among the northern peoples who lived within walled cities and called their rulers the *Shang*. Questions were inscribed on large, dried bones of

animals. A ritualist then applied a hot metal bar to the bones and discerned answers from the cracking patterns produced. Among the more than 150,000 Shang oracle bones found and deciphered to date, most questions had to do with things of this world, such as whether to undertake military action, journeys, or ceremonies, as well as the interpretation of omens believed to predict weather, illness, or the gender of unborn children.

Shang metal casters made finely decorated bronze vessels that were used in ceremonies to worship deities and ancestors. Inscriptions on the vessels indicate that the Shang rulers boasted of the unrivaled supernatural power of their own ancestors to act on their and society's behalf. Offerings of drink and food, including animals sacrificed on altars, were made at early Chinese burial sites. This Shang notion of reciprocity between dead ancestors and living kin remains a central aspect of East Asian religions up to the present day.

For the ruling elite, the cult of the dead created large tombs where they were buried with all the essentials for life in the "next world." The early Shang buried sacrificed human servants alongside the nobles; for later emperors, terra-cotta replicas of servants and animals replaced living beings.

Human access to the gods is another important religious belief today that was present in earliest antiquity. The Shang saw gods as present in mountains and rivers. The early Chinese attributed significance to patterns and events in nature and made offerings to particular gods associated with them. Spirits were thought to affect all areas of life, from military battles and foreign relations to business fortunes, marriage, and illness. The presence of gods and ancestor spirits was most dramatically attested to by people who served as spirit mediums and were called *wu/xi* (women/men). Some Chinese turned to the *wu/xi* shamans for divine aid, while others hired them to exorcise the demons blamed for causing personal sicknesses or troubles.

**Shang-di:** heavenly Lord, thought to preside over early Chinese pantheon

There is also an interesting Shang concept of a high deity called ***Shang-di***, "the Lord Above," regarded as so powerful that only the Shang rulers could petition him. The name signifies the elevation of one Shang ancestor to supreme status, though Shang-di endured subsequently in popular imagination as the superior deity who monitors human behavior. (Modern Chinese Protestants have used this term as a translation of *God*.)

Thus, the diffuse religion found later in East Asia stems from beliefs prevalent in early China: an interconnected universe peopled by spirits including dead ancestors, and the belief that unseen forces in heaven and on earth could be influenced by the petitions of shamans, oracle readers, and divine kings.

### *Zhou, Chin, and Han Dynasties (1122 BCE–220 CE)*

**ancestor veneration:** worship, feeding, and petitioning of the souls of dead ancestors

**yin-yang theory:** twin, complementary forces by which the Dao is known

The millennium from the Zhou dynasty (1122–221 BCE) until the fall of the Han (200 BCE–220 CE) was "formative," in the sense that, during this period, most of the ideas and practices inherited from the past were developed in more systematic forms and written down for the first time. It is also in this era that the great sages, whose teachings would so strongly influence not only the Chinese elite but the entire region, arose.

**Ancestor veneration**, deity worship, and the role of spirit mediums all spread as the population of China increased and dispersed southward. This era saw the development of **yin-yang theory** and the five substances theory (*wu-xing*: water, fire,

wood, metal, and earth) to make observations of nature and natural signs. The cult of **Tu-di Gong**, the "earth ruler" who controls fertility, became widespread among the largely agricultural populations. By Han times, Tu-di was addressed in legalistic petitions, reflecting the growing presence of law in Chinese society.

At court and among commoners, Chinese polytheistic theology regarded the deities as neither good nor evil, but as potentially both: They can be agents of illness and disaster, or they can deliver blessings. Most of the notable deities by the late Zhou dynasty were viewed ambivalently, with both hope and fear, as was the case for the deity Lord of the Yellow River, whose waters brought both good harvests and destructive floods. It is important to note that the worldview of Chinese commoners was that beneficial gods were pitted against malevolent demons; by contrast, the worldview of the literati elite emphasized abstract reasoning or mysticism.

Ancestor veneration developed further in the formative era. The family tomb became the key place connecting the living and the dead. Texts found in excavated tombs mention belief in a soul that survives into an afterlife, calling it a *chao-hun* ("cloud soul"). The dead were buried with objects that would be useful to a soul revived in the afterlife.

| Yin | Yang |
|---|---|
| Dark | Bright |
| Earth | Heaven |
| Female | Male |
| Autumn | Spring |
| Valley | Mountain |
| West | East |
| *Po* Soul (grave) | *Hun* Soul (heaven) |

The symbolism of the *Yi-Jing* was the main system for East Asians conceptualizing the incessantly changing universe, much as math equations are used to express the essential truths underlying the discoveries of modern science. The most common *yin-yang* symbol should be viewed as ever in motion, with the circles in each sector expanding until black becomes white and white black.

By the Han era, texts deposited in the tombs mention a new supreme overlord, a deity called **Tian di**, who keeps records on each individual soul. Tomb scrolls detail personal acts that seem intended to verify the records kept by Tian di; there are written petitions asking that the deceased be released from blame for any evil deeds performed in life. The belief that proper tombs can facilitate beneficial exchanges between living and dead grew stronger during this period. Rulers had texts compiled to describe the correct rites, and these practices were then widely adopted across Chinese society.

The Zhou era was marked by political instability and militarism. Regional states vied for control of territory and revenues, their rulers and officials showing little regard for moral order or respect for human life. Yet individuals arose who formulated the principles on which a just society could be established and by which humane leaders should be guided. These ideas would become the central pillars of East Asian life. Those who advocated individualistic retreat, learning from the natural world, and noninterference by the state as the best ways to ensure humanity's flourishing were called **Daoists**. Those who wished to cultivate their own humanity through disciplined learning, ritual practice, humility, and active social service were called **Confucians**.

**Tu-di Gong:** "earth ruler" believed to control fertility worshipped by farmers in early China

**Tian di:** supreme overlord in Heaven believed in Han-era China to keep records on each individual soul

**Daoists:** East Asian visionaries who advocated individualistic retreat, learning from nature, and noninterference by the state

**Confucians:** culture of literate elite informed by Confucius and his disciples

**Master K'ung:** given name of sage later known as Confucius

## *Confucius and the Literati Tradition*

Although one of the most influential figures in world history, **Master K'ung** (Confucius; ca. 551–479 BCE), failed to realize his own goal of securing an influential

Terra-cotta warriors, unearthed from an imperial tomb outside Xi'an, China, had been placed with the emperor to serve him in the afterlife.

position as a state minister. A gifted teacher, his students collected and passed down his oral teachings to their own students. Confucius developed the concepts of righteousness and of ***ren***, a term that has many shades of meaning but captures the sense of "being fully human." As the Chinese character for this is significantly rendered "human" + "two," this "being human" is in relationship to others. The chief means to ren was ***li***, which consisted of ethical propriety, good manners, and the cultivation of traditional ritual performances. The early Confucians imagined a world led by men, and their ideal was the *jun-zi*, a cultivated gentleman who learns from his teacher in youth and then continues to study, both to develop his virtue and to serve others.

**ren:** Confucian ideal of "being fully human"

**li:** Confucian ethic of correct behavior, which leads to ren

In this textbook, we use the Western term *Confucianism* instead of the corresponding Chinese term, *rujia*, which means "literary tradition." The tradition of the literati, or intellectuals, is rooted in the system of moral observance and ritual performance praised by Master K'ung.

**xiao:** Confucian ideal of filial conduct; respect for one's parents, elders, and ruler

The most important aspect of the li is the individual's conduct within the family. Here, the central principle is filial conduct (***xiao***), or the bond between child and parent. This relationship implies mutual obligations within a hierarchical framework. Protection and nurturing by a superior were rendered in return for selfless service and obedience. Classical Confucianism conceived of this bond as the fundamental human connection and identified four other bonds as extensions of it. The entire set comprised the Five Hierarchical Relationships, which were to lead society toward harmony and human flourishing. If xiao began with serving one's parents, it was to continue with serving one's ruler, thus bringing to maturity one's own

character. Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, described the Five Hierarchal Relationships as follows:

| Relationship | Principles of the Relationship |
|---|---|
| son and father | filial piety ↔ paternal example |
| minister and ruler | obedience ↔ righteousness |
| wife and husband | obedience ↔ faithful dominance |
| young and old | respect ↔ precedence and example |
| friend and friend | mutuality and trust (*hsin*) |

"At 15 I set my heart on learning; at 30 I firmly took my stand; at 40 I came to be free from doubts; at 50 I understood the decree of Heaven; at 60 my ear was attuned; at 70 I follow my heart's desire without overstepping the line."

—Confucius

SOURCE: D. C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects* (New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 63.

Confucius' theory was that if those who ruled and ministered both followed and encouraged society's adherence to maintaining these ideals, all would benefit and the state's harmony would be ensured. As set forth in the ***Analects***, the compilation of the master's teachings, anecdotes, and sayings, Confucius became a model for subsequent generations. The cultured human should be at ease while always showing careful respect; he is firm but kindhearted, an advocate for the practice of moderation who finds a natural balance in all endeavors.

***Analects:*** collection of sayings attributed to Confucius

Although he is described as being uninterested in the reality of the ghost or other spirits, Confucius was emphatic on the need for individuals to develop a deep respect for others as well as to establish harmony in the personalities of their immediate kin by their careful performance of funeral rituals and the rites of ancestor veneration.

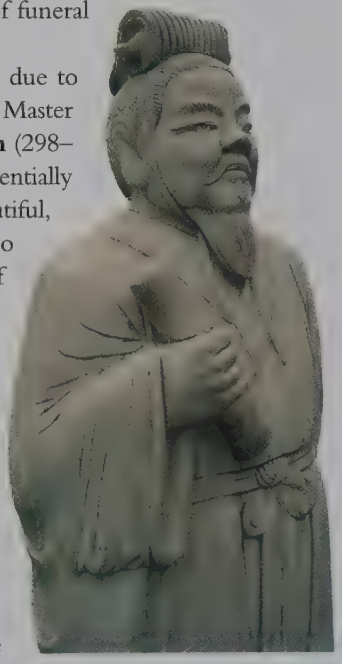


Image of Master K'ung, whose Western name, Confucius, was coined by early Jesuit missionaries.

The success of Confucius' teachings was largely due to their advocacy by several great disciples, notably Master Meng (or **Mencius**, 371–289 BCE) and **Master Xun** (298–238 BCE). Mencius argued that human nature is essentially good, that humans are naturally compassionate, dutiful, courteous, and inclined toward learning. Mencius also developed the Confucian view that the well-being of society depends on the virtue of the rulers, and that it is the state's responsibility to ensure the flourishing of its citizens. Another especially influential theory of Mencius applied Confucian thought to the destiny of a state: If a dynasty rules by virtue, then it receives the **Mandate of Heaven**, an authorization that can be revoked if rulers cease to be virtuous.

**Mencius:** first major disciple of Confucius; systemized Master K'ung's thought

**Master Xun:** influential early Confucian exponent with emphasis on authoritarian rule

**Mandate of Heaven:** theory that the forces of the universe favor a ruler

Master Xun, the third of the classical Confucian sages, proposed a more pessimistic, mechanistic, and authoritarian application of Master K'ung's ideas. In his view, humans are inherently antisocial and the

"Behave when away from home as though you were in the presence of an important guest. Deal with commoners as though you were officiating at an important ceremony."[1]
—Confucius

universe turns on impersonal forces. But since people can be trained, then once shown the good, they will inherently adopt practices that lead in that direction. Hence, Master Xun turned Confucians toward the careful study of the past, its ancient sages, and the texts that record the human history.

By the late Han era (100 CE), the two interrelated elements of the Confucian tradition were established: inner sagehood and outer nobility. Dynasties recorded their histories, officials argued about the Mandate of Heaven, and scholars looked to the earliest sages to model their own lives. We must also note that the notion of Confucius as merely a human sage of this world had already given way to a popular portrayal of him as a demigod.

**Dao:** mysterious power that moves the universe and is the source of life for all beings

**Lao Zi:** "Old Baby"; author of *Daodejing* and founder of Daoism

## *Early Daoist Philosophy*

During the formative era in China, the most important critique of Confucian doctrine came from those who argued that social relations would be harmonious only after humanity had synchronized itself with nature and with the **Dao**, the mystical reality underlying it.

The first great expression of Daoism is the poetic *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*). This work, traditionally attributed to an anonymous "Old Baby," or **Lao Zi** (Lao Tzu; d. 500 BCE?), aims to express the nature of the Dao while paradoxically beginning with the proviso that "the true Dao" cannot be spoken or adequately defined. (The sage's odd name implies the goal of attaining a pristine spiritual state, forever young.)

Lao Zi on an ox. The sage of Daoism depicted in a Ming-era painting.

In this philosophical system, Dao is the prime source of creation, from which the forces of yin and yang emerge in ever-shifting harmonies. Dao determines all things and flows as the spontaneous energy (***de***) of the universe, functioning without the will or purpose of a divine creator. To experience the Dao, one must pursue the path of noninterference (***wu-wei***) as in Lao Zi's dictum "Do nothing, and nothing will be left undone." The best teacher is (to use the example of the *Daodejing*) water that flows freely yet can overcome all obstacles.

The Daoists believed that the Confucians harmed society through imposing rules that interfered with humanity's natural inclinations. Their political message was to return to primal simplicity, with the state interfering as little as possible with the lives of the people. The highest calling for humans, argued the Daoists, is not state service but retreat into the mountains, where the Dao can be felt most clearly.

The second Daoist classic, the ***Zhuang Zi***, is attributed to and named after the sage Zhuang Zi (365–290 BCE). Through lively parables and mind-boggling paradoxes, his sayings explore the mysterious reality of the Dao in everyday human experiences. The most famous example is perhaps his meditation on waking from a dream of being a butterfly. He asks: Which is real? Was Zhuang Zi

## Defining Terms

Our treatment of multiple East Asian religions in the same chapter calls for a brief explanation of the central terms.

For convenience, we use *Confucianism*, a Western term originating in eighteenth-century Europe, instead of the corresponding Chinese term, *rujia*, meaning "literati tradition." The tradition of the literati (or intellectuals) is rooted in the system of moral observance and ritual performance praised in the sixth century BCE by Master K'ung (or, in English rendering, Confucius), whose teachings were commented on and extended by subsequent sages. The Confucian tradition was made China's state ideology over two millennia ago, and it became noted for its books of wisdom, political institutions, social teachings, and attention to self-cultivation. Scholars during the Sung era and subsequent centuries, known by Westerners as neo-Confucians, edited the foundational texts and reinterpreted their tradition, influenced by both Buddhist and Daoist thought. In this cumulative reform, the rujia neo-Confucian tradition became the most common shared spiritual and ethical culture of China that spread to Korea and Japan. Mastering the tradition's classical texts and central doctrines was at the center of the educational system and government bureaucracy until well into the modern era (1905 in China, 1867 in Japan, and 1910 in Korea). Reflecting this diversity, we use *Confucianism* without imputing to the tradition a singular creed, ritual, or institution.

*Daoism* can refer to loosely connected philosophical and religious traditions and so always needs further specification. All traditions of Daoism build on the earliest texts attributed to Lao Zi and Xuang Zi, that articulate the path to cultivate an immediate sense of personal connection with the primal force or reality of the universe, one that its sages labeled "the Dao," using a character that means "way" or "path." The sages of religious Daoism themselves are revered as humans who had realized supernatural physical powers or spiritual immortality. Through meditation or alchemy, this strand of Daoism advocated the sages' path to immortality and divinity; eventually, monastic traditions (on the model of Buddhism) were developed to sustain communities of seekers and maintain cults to enshrined immortals. Many aspects of "applied" Daoism were developed as "secular" traditions to manage worldly life in East Asia: acupuncture to adjust the flow of the life force flowing in the human body, *feng shui* to help humans live their lives in harmony with the natural energy flowing in the natural and built environment, *Yi-Jing* and other forms of prognostication to determine the proper moment to perform important tasks (marriage, travel, etc.), and *wu-shu*, or the martial arts, to focus human powers in order to overcome enemies.

Deity cults in traditional East Asia were universal. Springs, rivers, and remarkable geographic features—particularly mountain peaks—are still thought to have extraordinary divine inhabitants whose spiritual force is immanent. Each sector of the earth, in fact, is thought to have a resident deity who serves as the counterpart of the government official in charge of the village, the town, the province, and the state itself, with a hierarchy of gods mirroring the human civil service. Across East Asia, the common popular perception is that the deities exist and can be contacted at temples, especially mountain shrines. A person will question a god and then, through ancient divination rituals, attempt to discern an answer. In the popular conception, deities, like local officials, can be paid to provide favors; the big gods may be induced to discipline lesser gods (or demons) who cause troubles. Humans, out of mutual respect, are obliged to show the gods thanksgiving regularly for life, health, and prosperity. Gods in China who failed to provide assistance were reviled and abandoned.

Diffuse religion is the useful term that indicates what for most East Asians consists of a spiritual life that is centered within the family unit and immediate locality. It has its roots in the ancestor veneration and spirit worship of earliest antiquity but incorporates general and basic elements of Confucianism,

## Defining Terms *continued*

Daoism, and Buddhism. The unity of a region's diffuse religion derives from the long-established practice by the state bureaucracy of promulgating full expressions of the common traditions; at times, scholars were assigned to codify the myriad texts and practices to give them coherence. From medieval times until now, traditional printed almanacs have been important texts that record such teachings and orchestrate yearly practices based on the lunar calendar for families and localities. Among the major elements of the diffuse religion is a sense that the universe has fundamental forces and powers, requiring humans to seek harmony with them to achieve health and long life. Further, the world is believed to have certain natural hierarchies that must be acknowledged and respected, in forms prescribed by the ancient traditions. This requirement of hierarchical respect extends to one's departed kin.

The sectarian religions in East Asia were institutional Buddhism and Daoism and the sects that arose periodically, often with the goal of overthrowing the state. Such separate religions were meaningful primarily for the very small elites who joined an order, adopted a singular discipline within one tradition, or sought individualistic sectarian goals. Over time, however, many sects ceased to advocate the singularity of their approach alone.

Thus, it is hard to find firm boundaries separating the spiritual traditions of East Asia. The Dao is a concept shared by all schools; the Buddhists, for example, first used the term to define the Buddha's teaching (Dharma) in early translations. The goal of harmony is also common in each spiritual path. We are able to treat East Asia's religions under a single heading precisely because of the commonality of this "diffuse borrowing," the nexus of the diffuse religion in the home and among kin rather than in large institutions, and the recurring attempts by elites and commoners to harmonize these rich traditions. In each nation, the inclusive harmonizing trait has been expressed with only slight variation: in Japan, "Shintoist in youth, Confucian as an adult, Buddhist in old age"; in Korea, "Confucian by obligation, shamanist at heart"; and in China, "Confucian in the office, Daoist outside."

"Standing by the deep valley makes you think deep; Scaling the heights makes you aim high."
—*Book of Yi Xun*

dreaming of being a butterfly, or is the human Zhuang Zi instead merely that butterfly's dream? This text also explores the acceptance of death. Such acceptance is the necessary step toward experiencing transcendent freedom.

Daoist mysticism provided an alternative to the rules and regulations of strict Confucianism, offering spiritual guidance to those who retreated from government service or active social life. Daoist refuge is found in nature, and the natural world inspired subsequent Chinese artists, including poets and painters.

***Zhuang Zi:*** the second Daoist classic text, named after a sage of this name

**de:** mysterious, spontaneous energy of the universe

**wu-wei:** Daoist ideal of "noninterference"

**qi:** vital life force in individuals and in nature

**"Religious Daoism" (Dao Jiao)** The basic philosophical ideas of ancient Daoism were developed into various religious traditions, which differed according to the spiritual disciplines required for individuals to achieve immortality. There were two main avenues to reach this goal. The first required meditation aimed at strengthening and multiplying the life force (***qi***), typically through breathing exercises, fasting, and sexual practices. These practices create a concentrated spiritual essence that can survive the physical body's death. The second involved the study of alchemy, the art of transforming such substances as mercury and gold into an elixir that, when ingested, gives birth to an "inner child" whose body and soul are invincible to decay or death.

Through these two paths, Daoist mystics and alchemists contributed to the development of Chinese science and medicine as well as to the martial arts traditions. **Religious Daoism** also focused on temples dedicated to the divine immortals. Daoist practitioners who reached perfection after their ascension to divine status were called upon to help human beings in practical as well as spiritual matters.

Deity from a Daoist temple, where immortals are worshipped to secure blessings.

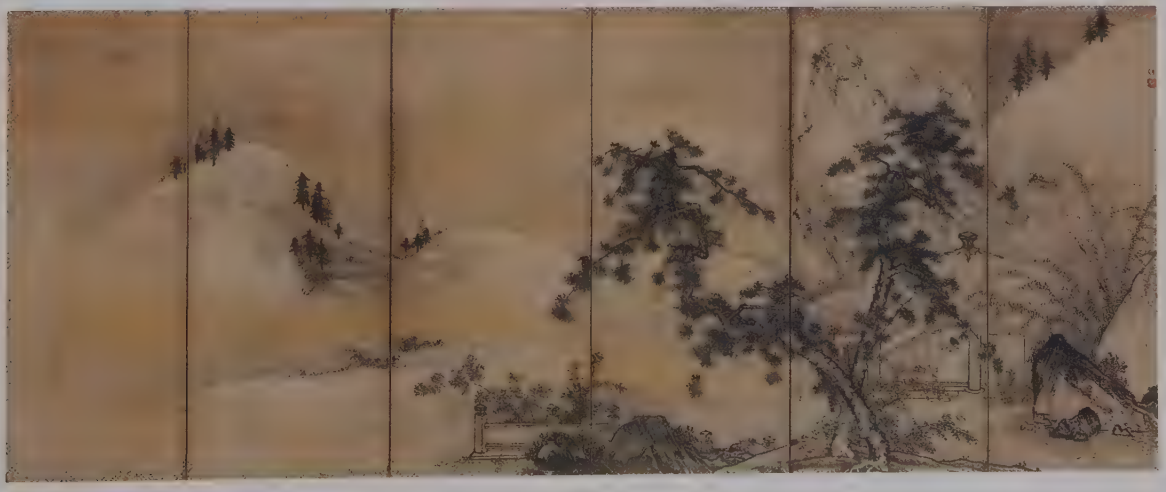
**religious Daoism:** tradition devoted to attaining individual immortality through alchemical infusions or meditative practices

**philosophical Daoism:** tradition articulating path to harmony for individuals and society based on understanding and flowing with natural forces

## Daoism Traditions: Basic Beliefs

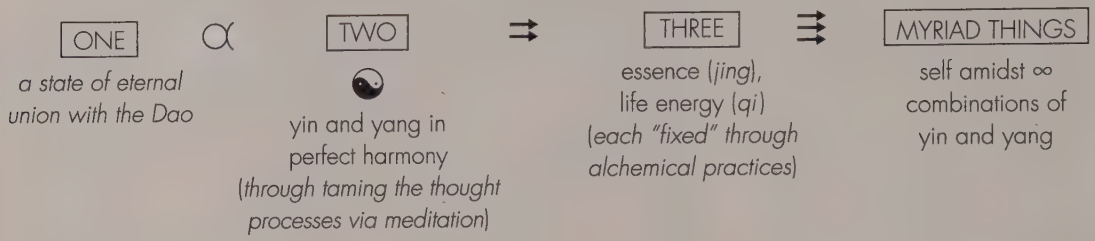
**Philosophical Daoism** evolved from the *Daodejing* and provides the doctrinal foundation for all Daoist traditions. Three key ideas from this elite tradition remain important across East Asia.

There are three particularly important Daoist beliefs that serve as foundational. First is the Daoist notion that humanity is interconnected in a web of natural forces, all shifting and reversing direction when they reach their apex. Reality is best perceived through this interconnection, for in this movement, the power of the Dao can be discerned from moment to



A recluse in the mountains. Hermits like the one in this fourteenth-century Chinese painting looked to nature for inspiration and as a source of primal energy (qi).

## Stages of Creation in Daoism




The Daoist sage seeks to reverse the process of creation, by engaging in meditative practices to preserve jing and move it toward the head, multiplying qi, finding harmony within the self and the universe, then merging with the Dao.

moment. The classic text describing "the state of the moment" is the *Yi-Jing*, and for millennia, it has helped East Asians determine the various combinations of yin and yang forces at work in a given setting.

The second important Daoist notion is that some individuals can attain a state of ultimate transformation, transcending mortality via alchemical, dietary, or meditative practices that impart the power to know and control unseen forces. Daoists see the human body as potentially perfectible, but those who attain immortality are few. Here, Daoists join with Confucians in seeing the world as worthy of improvement and capable of perfection through human actions, with nature occupying a dual role as humanity's true home as well as teacher.

The third important Daoist notion is that the pursuit of simplicity is essential for spiritual development as well as for the betterment of society. Only the "natural person" who "goes with the flow" (wu-wei), avoiding unnatural action, can find the truth, and only a society whose citizens live in a simple manner can find true peace and justice. Thus, Daoism, with Buddhism, provided a counterculture to the Confucian establishment, by serving those who wished to withdraw from society or to critique the excesses of those in power and even, at times, bolstering a rebel group's intention to overthrow the regime.

"The mysteries of Heaven and earth are embodied in the inhalation and exhalation. . . . Your internal energy must be gathered in its three forms: generative, vital, and spiritual energy. Once the soul is merged into this unified spirit, it must be nourished. Vital, it will leave the body, ascend to the heavens, and become immortal."[2]

—Daoist Sage Wang Ch'ung

### *State Religion: The First Confucian Epoch (221 BCE–220 CE)*

The first full unification of China was brought about by the first Qin emperor of the Qin dynasty (221 BCE–206 BCE). He instituted a central bureaucracy and state religion, both designed to promote social unity by harmonizing the forces of nature with imperial rule. Although he made good on many of his lofty ambitions, this emperor obsessively sought personal immortality through Daoist alchemy and ruthlessly suppressed

viewpoints he considered deviant. His Mandate of Heaven lasted only fifteen years (221–206 BCE). Many later Chinese emperors, however, would act as though, and even assert, that they were divine.

The next unification of China occurred under the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), who established an imperial university and examination system that was based exclusively on Confucian teachings. By the later Han era (ca. 175 CE), the content of the **Five Classics** had been officially established. These five classics are the *Yi-Jing* (*Book of Changes*), *Shu Jing* (*Book of Documents*), *Shi Jing* (*Book of Poetry*), and *Li Jing* (*Book of Rites*), and a historical work that records events in early Chinese states for the purpose of assessing blame and praise. The classics promoted a tradition of learning from the past to guide future governance, and they supported the view that, for full development, a human must integrate historical, social, political, and metaphysical awareness.

**Five Classics:** Confucian canon of five works attributed to Master K'ung

The state religion developed in the Han dynasty placed the emperor as chief priest, advised by Confucian experts on ritual performance. Daoist thought was integrated into imperial religion by specialists who used Daoist techniques to interpret omens in the natural world. On behalf of the kingdom, the emperor alone could sacrifice to the spirits of the departed imperial ancestors; as the Son of Heaven, he revered heaven and earth as his symbolic parents and worshipped the primary cosmic spirits. The emperor held the Confucian Mandate of Heaven as long as he acted for the well-being of the empire; earthquakes, eclipses, and unusual weather were interpreted as signs that heaven might be withdrawing its mandate.

### *Being Human: The Individual, the Family, and the Ancestors*

In the Confucian worldview, each person is at the center of multiple relationships, which are determined by gender, generational location in the family, and status in the empire. According to the norms of filial piety, the young owe obedience to parents, women to men, and citizens to rulers. This worldview is very different from the individualism that dominates the modern West and has spread across the globe through modernization.

The Confucian ideal was for the family to benefit in old age from the reciprocities that required their deference earlier in life, and to have their political obedience

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Daoist

The need for individuals who seek to understand the universe to travel to mountains and rivers to discuss ultimate principles is conveyed in this parable by the great Daoist sage Zhuang Zi:

A frog in a well, restricted in his environment, is unable to talk about the ocean. A summer insect, confined to its season, cannot talk about ice. A poor village scholar, restricted by his learning, cannot discuss the Dao. A person can find spiritual truth only by leaving his home cliffs and riverbanks and gazing upon the mighty ocean. Only then can the seeker perceive his own place and begin to understand the Great Dao.

—Zhuang Zi

Source: Adapted from D. Howard Smith, ed., *The Wisdom of the Taoists* (New York: New Directions, 1980), pp. 82–83.

Modern Chinese family gravesite in Singapore, sited and designed in accordance with the principles of feng shui. Here, family members gather twice yearly to feast and make offerings to their ancestors.

rewarded by heaven's blessings. To support this understanding, Daoism contributed the belief that since human beings are a combination of heaven (yang) and earth (yin), which in their exact balance determine gender, personality, and health, they must pursue harmony in their social relations and so respect these primary relations.

All persons are also seen as benefiting after death from the Confucian ordering of life, since the living descendants are expected to perform the necessary rites to ensure their best possible destiny in the afterlife. Indigenous beliefs going back to the Shang era later merged with Buddhist notions to create a composite understanding of the individual's fate after death. What emerged in classical China (and was accepted in Korea and Japan) was a belief in the Buddhist concept of *karma* and an understanding that after death all souls undergo "processing" in a netherworld. There, divine magistrates carefully calculate karma and then send the soul on to its proper destiny. In this way, indigenous Chinese and Buddhist ideas coexisted in harmony.

"Among gentlemen, rites for the dead are taken as the way of man; Among the common people, they are taken as matters involving demons."

—Master Xun

SOURCE: D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (New York: Penguin, 1970), p. 191.

In conception and in practice, then, ancestors live on in the East Asian family's presence and receive ongoing ritual attention: in the grave, in an ancestral tablet (located in the home altar or clan temple), and potentially, in the underworld, especially during the first years after death. The Korean and Chinese practice of burning paper replicas of items considered useful in the underworld is thought to send relief to loved ones who are waiting out an intermediate state before reincarnation.

By the end of the Han era, after centuries of state support, Confucian ethics centered on hierarchy and mutual obligation had thoroughly permeated Chinese society. The key elements of the diffuse religion were widely shared and had come to include the notions of yin-yang theory, geomancy (feng shui), the major deities of

the pantheon, and the understanding of souls going to an afterlife. The Confucian literati were also convinced that they could unite the society around a common ritual discipline, with ancestor rites the universal and civilizing norm.

## Development of the Multiple Traditions in Post-Han China

We now move into the fractured China of the post-Han centuries (220–617), a time when the Confucian tradition fell out of power just as Buddhist missionaries arrived and secured a permanent place in China for their faith.

### *Arrival of Buddhism*

The transplantation of Buddhism from India into East Asia is one of the greatest cultural diffusions in world history, matched in importance only by the conversion to Christianity of the peoples of Europe and the Americas and the conversion to Islam by many peoples of Eurasia. Buddhist monks reached China on the Silk Road through central Asia by 120 CE and later over the sea routes.

Mahayana Buddhism entered East Asia through merchants and missionary monks, but it became firmly established everywhere owing to the patronage of emperors and the aristocracy. Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese since then came to believe in karma and added the Buddha and celestial bodhisattvas as additional divinities for their devotions.

Chinese literati have a long history of criticizing Buddhism. They saw it as disrupting family life and service to one's kin, and they questioned why Chinese would worship deities who originated from "barbarian" peoples outside China. The Buddhist ideal of monastic retreat for personal enlightenment was also construed as unnatural and antisocial behavior. But in the splintered, disunited China in the period after the fall of the Han (220–618 CE), the Confucian literati were out of power.

These Confucian anti-Buddhist arguments would be recycled at various times, but for almost all of its first 500 years in East Asia, Buddhism was widely and deeply incorporated into the region's religious life, finding support in the imperial courts and, eventually, among all segments of society, from philosophers to farmers. As time went on, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese monks

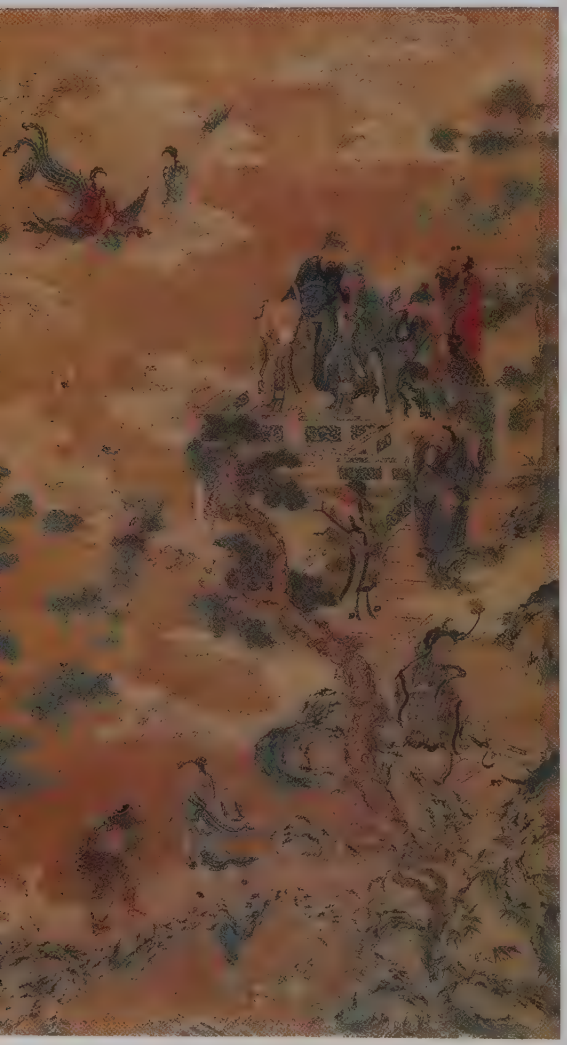
With a sacred mushroom in his pocket, a Daoist immortal plays his flute in paradise.

would formulate their own interpretations of the many Buddhist teachings, creating distinctive East Asian schools of textual interpretation and ritual practices.

### *The Institutional Development of Daoism*

Another effect of Buddhism's rise was to motivate adherents of Daoism to systematize their texts and teachings and to create institutions modeled after Buddhist monasteries. The meditative regimes and elaborate rituals that eventually developed in the Daoist monasteries gave individuals many avenues for practicing Daoism.

By the year 300, several branches of religious Daoism had formalized early practices. Guo Hong (283–363) was the most prominent figure, known for his seeking to harmonize the tradition with Confucianism. Beginning with the notion that heaven's greatest creation is life itself, Guo Hong argued that pursuing longevity and immortality must be the greatest human goal. He prescribed a path to that goal based on moral goodness, social service, and alchemy utilizing two metals: gold, which neither corrodes nor diminishes if buried or melted, and cinnabar, a red mercury ore that keeps changing as long as it is heated. This "inner alchemy" culminated in the practitioner's ingesting these refined, cooked substances and wild herbs along with breath meditation to achieve profound transformation and oneness with the cosmos.



The eight immortals of Daoism, depicted in a Qing dynasty hanging scroll, with the Three Stars and the Queen Mother of the West. These were the chief divinities enshrined in Daoist temples from the Ming period onward.

Daoism competed with Buddhism for favor at the imperial courts, and devotees among the emperors spread the reformed and newly organized tradition across China. The new monastic orders strengthened Daoist traditions. Daoist scriptures were catalogued and organized, and later commentaries expanded the tradition's literature by thousands of additional works. However, organized Daoism never penetrated Korea or Japan.

## Religion Under the Early Japanese Imperial State: Buddhism and Shinto

In Japan, as elsewhere, Buddhism began among the elite, who saw in it a means to unite a fragmented land. Indeed, it was under the royal sponsorship of Prince Shotoku (d. 622) that Buddhism became the state religion. By 741, an edict called for officials to establish a Buddhist monastery and temple in many Japanese provinces, enroll at least twenty monks and ten nuns, and recite texts and perform rituals for the benefit of emperor and state.

Buddhism, however, was not the only foreign belief system to shape the development of Japan: Confucian texts

and teachers from China and Korea were also influential in the early courts. A seventh-century reform established a Confucian bureaucracy modeled after that of China. Daoist ideas of natural harmony and energy flow, both in the environment and within the person, along with yin-yang analysis, were part of this broad cultural influence. But in Japan, neither Daoist monasteries nor Daoist monks ever existed. Moreover, the Japanese never ceased to worship their own distinct divinities, the *kami*, believing the islands themselves to have been created by them. This religious tradition is called **Shinto**.

**Shinto:** indigenous religion of Japan that reveres native deities, including the Emperor

## *The Shinto Pantheon of Japan*

In many respects, the Shinto tradition in Japan shares basic assumptions and practices regarding deities found throughout East Asia. Shamanism also developed in Japan, because its mediums gave the community access to the gods as well as to their departed ancestors. Pilgrimages to mountains thought to be divine abodes were common. However, as Shinto mythology developed, it was adapted, systematized, and disseminated by the early state. These accounts portrayed Japan as a unique spiritual territory filled with the distinctive deities called **kami**. Legends focused on the kami enabled Shinto priests to enshrine a unique pantheon. This helps explain why the Japanese, despite the importation of many other aspects of the country's religious life from China and Korea, were less ready to adopt Chinese deities and folk traditions.

**kami:** Japanese deities associated with places, certain animals, and the emperor

The Shinto pantheon is headed by the goddess **Amaterasu**, the kami of the sun, credited in Japanese myth with having aided in the creation of the country and with being a progenitor of the royal family. Other kami are associated with wind and

**Amaterasu:** kami of the sun; progenitor of Japanese imperial line

Wood-block print of the sun goddess Amaterasu, legendary progenitor of the Japanese people.

"The belief is that the new year is given to us by . . . the kami of years. What comes from the realm of the kami is inherently good. . . . So we look out upon the possibilities of the new year, and we want to purify our blunders and cast off whatever evil influences we may have accumulated in the old year."

—Shinto priest Uesugi Guji (1987)

SOURCE: John K. Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), p. 207.

weather, geological features, plants and animals, and ancestral spirits. Shinto shrines often display mirrors as symbols of Amaterasu and for their symbolic meaning of an ideal purity and brilliance.

Until the modern era, Shinto priests of major shrines inherited their positions and learned the rituals from their fathers; thus, they were always males from aristocratic families. But over the last 150 years, Shinto has been organized with state regulations. Today, priests have to pass a state-prescribed course of training at an institution such as Kokugakuin University, founded for this purpose. The role of the *shinshoku*, as the priests are usually called, involves mastery of the daily gestures of respect offered to the kami, the annual rituals of the shrine, calligraphy, and complex forms of ritual purification. Shinto has never developed any "inner" spiritual practices. And as we shall see, in the early modern period, the state regulated and reformed Shinto as a vehicle for modernization. For its contemporary exponents, however, the artful rituals oriented to the deities throughout the seasons offer a means of achieving refined sensitivity and moral transformation.

# East Asian Religions in the Classical Era (645–1800 CE)

## Classical Imperial China (645–1271)

During the T'ang dynasty (618–907), China ended four centuries of fragmentation and Buddhism enjoyed extraordinary development. At first, Buddhism in northern China appealed to the non-Han conquerors, and it succeeded in the south through popular and charismatic monastic preachers. But in the T'ang era, more unified monastic networks developed into seven doctrinal schools. Each school took as its highest authoritative source a different text that was thought to contain the Buddha's highest teachings.

T'ang China, with its capital in Chang'an (modern Xi'an), was the world's most advanced civilization. Living within the high city walls were merchants from across the Eurasian world; distributed in assigned neighborhoods were Christians, Hindus, Manicheans, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. These resident aliens mixed with Buddhists and Daoists, who had their own numerous monasteries and temples. The wealth from trade, efficient taxation, and imperial patronage underwrote a golden age that found expression in all the fine arts while spreading Buddhist influences and religious practices across the empire and into both Korea and Japan. Adventurous Chinese monks, such as the renowned Xuan Zang (d. 664), even traveled to India for fourteen years in search of additional texts and teachers.

This pluralistic, tolerant world was disrupted in 845, when edicts by Emperor Wu-zong forced 250,000 Buddhist monastics to return to lay life and the state confiscated all but forty-nine monasteries throughout the empire. The emperor was partly motivated by considerations of personnel and finances: With the success of Buddhism,

Confucian officials were concerned that too many lands were being donated to monasteries, thereby depriving the government of tax revenues. In addition, increasing numbers of men and women were joining the Buddhist sangha, where they became exempt from both taxation and (in the case of the men) military service. Wu-zong's second motivation was religious. An ardent Daoist, he was eager to advance the tradition's popularity. But the setback in terms of the loss of lands, property, and popular support meant that, though it was revived, Buddhism was never again to dominate China's religious landscape as it had before 845.

The later T'ang era was a time of resurgent Confucianism. This tradition had continued to guide the familial life of commoners, and Confucius himself was used as a symbol of national unity. The groundwork was being laid for a brilliant assimilation of Buddhism and Daoism.

## *Song Dynasty: The Second Epoch of Confucianism (960–1279)*

The so-called Second Epoch of Confucianism reinvigorated the older ideology of human relatedness based on hierarchy, age, and gender. Neo-Confucianism moved to the center of Chinese religious life, later influencing Korea and Japan as well.

Song dynasty administrators restored Confucian learning as the basis for winning a position in its burgeoning civil service. This measure encouraged a return to the Confucian classics as a subject for study, further scholarship, and teaching. As the best minds of the day once again were drawn into reinterpreting the indigenous tradition, private academies that instilled virtue and erudition flowered.

**Zhu Xi:** great Neo-Confucian master who integrated elements of Buddhism and Daoism into Confucianism

The Confucian tradition's great "Second Master" was **Zhu Xi** (1130–1200). The works compiled and commented on by him, entitled *Jinsi Lu* (*Reflections of Things at Hand*), were immensely influential. Zhu Xi gave students the order in which to study the classics and crafted strong arguments against Buddhism and Daoism. Zhu Xi also codified the system of thought known as **neo-Confucianism**.

**neo-Confucianism:** tradition seeking to harmonize early Confucian humanism with elements of Daoism and Buddhism

Despite their apparent criticism of Daoism and Buddhism, the neo-Confucians in fact were strongly influenced by both. Of equal importance in securing the success of neo-Confucianism was Zhu Xi's compilation of a ritual manual that imparted Confucian procedures for all life-cycle rites, the non-Buddhist rituals around which the majority of Chinese ordered their lives. This ritual text, like the *Jinsi Lu*, was especially influential across East Asia.

Neo-Confucianism's strength was that it provided both the individual and the state with a convincing philosophy for understanding the world. The neo-Confucian philosophers emphasized that education was needed to perfect human awareness of li and that inner meditative cultivation (a borrowing from Buddhism), which Zhu Xi called "investigating the nature of things," was needed to perfect the qi. Almost all the neo-Confucians assumed the reality of karma as one of life's causal agents.

Only under the guidelines set forth by the neo-Confucian masters did the literati tradition acquire its own systematic regime of spiritual training. The first stage of training was "disciplining the body" by means of the six arts of Confucian education:

"The ideal sage is one who is first in worrying about the world's troubles and last in enjoying its pleasures."

—Fan-Chung-Yen (989–1052)

SOURCE: Arthur Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 43.

ritual, music, archery, calligraphy, horsemanship, and mathematics. All were defined very broadly. For example, *ritual* means conducting religious rites as well as mastering the proper ways of eating, walking, and asking questions. The *Analects* provide many instances of seemingly trivial events associated with Confucius, but those events had their use in just this context: providing the sage's life as a model for disciplined training.

Beyond foundational training, all the neo-Confucian subschools called for the "rectification of the heart-mind" and prescribed new practices: discipline manifested by outward zeal in investigating the external world as well as the personal goal of knowing oneself. The aim was to become a perfected person, a *sheng-ren*, who has achieved fully his or her complete human nature.

The popular convergence of the classical traditions in late traditional China was inspired by neo-Confucian figures like Zhu Xi who sought harmony by learning from all orientations. The diffuse religion still extant in contemporary East Asia stems from their brilliant syntheses of ancient sources.

### *Neo-Theories of Order, Hierarchy, and Relatedness*

The Confucian notion of the self that became reinforced in family norms and in state law is decidedly not that of the isolated individual, but of the person as "a center of relatedness." This concept can be understood as a series of concentric circles, with the assumption that to reach their highest potential, persons must act harmoniously within their families, local communities, and states as well as with heaven beyond. This scheme clearly implies that engagement in culture and community is necessary for both the person and humanity overall to flourish. As the Confucian classic, the *Great Learning*, states:

> The ancients who wished to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wished to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their intentions sincere.
>
> Those who wished to make their intentions sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists of the investigation of things. . . . Only when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family is regulated, the state will be in order; and when the state is in order, there will be peace throughout the world.[3]

The elaboration of meditative practices and multidisciplinary studies by the neo-Confucian masters established a rich tradition designed to develop the individual's integral relations with each circle. Such later figures as Zhang Zai (1020–1077) went on to combine this concentric conception with the Daoist ideal of finding "full humanity" by merging with the cosmos:

> Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore, that which fills the universe

I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature.
All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.[4]

## The Development of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism in Korea and Japan

In Korea, Buddhism flourished under imperial support once the country had been united under the Silla dynasty (668–918). Ties to Chinese Buddhism were strong, and almost all of the early Chinese schools had Korean counterparts. Korean monks were notable in China, and their commentaries on major texts were studied in both Japan and Tibet. Yet over time, Korean monks were most successful at finding harmony rather than division in their development of the tradition from the various Chinese schools and teachings.

Religion in the Koryo dynasty (918–1392) continued in this mode. Uniquely Korean was the centrality of Son (Ch'an/Zen) Buddhism, which was to become the most influential school in subsequent Korean Buddhist history. It assimilated the scholastic schools introduced from China and closely adapted Buddhism to Korean culture.

In Japan, the assimilation of Buddhism had ecumenical aspects as well, especially once the capital was moved to Kyoto in 800 CE, as various elements of Mahayana Buddhism and Daoist theories of yin-yang imported from China were effectively integrated with Shinto practices.

The subsequent Kamakura era (1185–1333) was a time of civil breakdown and frequent chaos, as military leaders usurped the power of the emperor and established a social system closely akin to that of European feudalism. The next 700 years were an age of widespread contact with China. Trade grew, and Buddhist monks were instrumental in bringing to Japan the two very popular schools that had survived the persecutions in post-T'ang China: Pure Land and Ch'an/Zen. Notable monks of this era also brought neo-Confucian learning, literature, and the arts to Japan.

The disorder and suffering in the Kamakura era also led to dramatic changes in Japanese religions, especially Buddhism. Kamakura religious leaders in Japan established the framework for subsequent schools that remained relatively stable until the early modern era.

The most popular Buddhist school was Pure Land, and its advocates taught that an individual's salvation was completely in the hands of the Buddha of the Pure Land, whom they called *Amida*, from the Sanskrit name *Amitabha*. They emphasized the practice of repeating Amida's name as faith alone in the degenerate **mappo** age could enable rebirth in a realm where the realization of nirvana was certain. Pure Land teacher Shinran (1173–1263) ended the requirement of monastic celibacy, and Pure Land remains the largest Buddhist school in Japan today.

**mappo:** Buddhist doctrine of world in decline

The second new school established during the Kamakura era was Zen, and it, too, was brought from China, by two Japanese monks, Eisai (1141–1215) and Dogen

(1200–1253). In adopting sitting meditation, mind puzzles (*koans*), and unusual teaching methods from Chinese teachers, Zen masters in Japan created an innovative, uniquely East Asian lineage of Buddhism. It also was very traditionalist, however, in rejecting the concept of mappo and resisting the other schools' radical simplification of Buddhism into mere ritual repetition and reliance on faith. Zen teachers insisted that each individual had to win his or her own salvation on the meditation mat through persistence and self-power alone.

**Nichiren:** monk who founded new Buddhist school based on primacy of the *Lotus Sutra*

Another remarkable Buddhist leader of this era was **Nichiren** (1222–1282), a monk who attributed the decline in Japanese life to the neglect of the *Lotus Sutra*, which he viewed as containing the Buddha's supreme teaching. The Nichiren school advocated simply chanting the name of the Lotus Sutra as the means for personal transformation as well as national renewal. (It is a practice continued to the present day in the Soka Gakkai, a modern Nichiren-derived school that now spans the globe.)

"Use Buddhism to rule the mind, Daoism to rule the body, Confucianism to rule the world."

—Emperor Xiao Zong (1163–1189)

SOURCE: Wing-sit Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 497–498

Going back as early as the Kamakura era, ideas regarding Shinto–Buddhist accommodation were heard from both sides: Shinto exponents argued that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas were really indigenous kami gods, and the Buddhists built Shinto shrines in their monastic courtyards, consistent with the view that the kami were in fact protectors or bodhisattvas. This is an example of the urge to harmonize the various spiritual traditions in East Asia.

## East Asian Religions in the Late Classical Era (1400–1800)

The four centuries preceding the modern era show few religious innovations across East Asia. For Buddhism, this era is characterized by elaborations of traditional practices and the modest growth of monastic networks.

"Although the Three Teachings are different, in the arguments they put forward, they are One."

—Liu Mi (active 1324)

SOURCE: Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (1993), p. 17.

Across East Asia, the diffuse religion remained central, as ancestor ritualism, local cults to important deities, and the role of the spirit mediums defined the religious field in cities and villages alike. For Ming-era China (1368–1644), a popular text called *Feng Shen Yan-yi* (*The Canonization of the Gods*) was especially influential in promulgating the idea of an orderly pantheon of Chinese divinities in a hierarchy that included Buddhas, immortals, gods, and local spirits. Throughout China, it was a standard practice for state officials in each province to order and approve the deities and temple activities. In all major cities, there was to be in place a Confucian temple, a military temple featuring the war god Guan Yu and other notable heroes, and a **city god** who had authority over all the proximate village earth gods.

**city god:** Chinese deity who oversees a city's spirits and to whom every family's kitchen god reports at year's end

### *"The Unity of the Three Traditions": Late Ming to Early Qing Eras in China*

The Chinese emphasis on harmony was also extended to "the unity of the **three faiths**," meaning Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Despite this, many philosophers who were exclusively committed to one of these faiths still argued that their tradition was superior in answering the fundamental spiritual questions. But more

**three faiths:** Chinese grouping of the three great traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism)

popular were teachers such as Jiao Hong (1540–1620), who regarded all three teachings as in fact "a single teaching," stating that each merely uses separate language to articulate its truth and that all three could—and should—be believed.

Among the Confucians who most powerfully conveyed this ecumenical ethos was Wang Yangming (1472–1529), whose view of the "true gentleman" was based on the assumption that everyone can know the good and that "self-perfection" means knowing this goodness to the maximum. Wang argued, in language mirroring the "all beings have the Buddha nature" doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, that all humans have the potential to achieve self-perfection, since all share a primordial awareness.

By the end of the Ming dynasty in 1644, Buddhism had settled into a permanent place in Chinese civilization. We thus find influential teachers such as Chu-hong (1535–1615) preaching that the essence of Buddhism was social activism as expressed

## Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism in an Enduring Ming Tale

The *Journey to the West* (or "monkey story"), written by the Confucian scholar Wu Cheng-en (1500–1582), is an example of the Ming-era harmonization of the "three faiths." It recounts the journey of the great Buddhist monk Xuan Zang (d. 664) to search for texts in India. In this dangerous quest, he is assisted by the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, a figure from the Chinese folk pantheon. While ostensibly the account of the great Buddhist monk's journey, recurring incidents in the long tale (spanning four hefty volumes in the English translation) are employed to teach self-discipline—a personal trait valued by both traditions—to the Monkey King and Confucian wisdom to the monk. In many episodes, the success of Xuan Zang's mission depends on the Monkey King's aid and on the monk's timely learning of how common people think about the ways of the world. Translated into opera and folk ballads, the monkey story became one of China's most popular narratives, its major characters defining important personality stereotypes while conveying the pattern of Confucianism dominating the literati culture of the Ming dynasty.

The Monkey King leads the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang and other companions, illustrating a scene from the Ming dynasty tale, *The Journey to the West*.

through charity and moral action. He also emphasized that to be a filial child and a loyal subject was to be a "good Buddhist." This view was expressed by many subsequent Chinese Buddhists.

Forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things is not only true of the great man. Even the heart-mind of the small man is no different. . . . Therefore when he sees a child about to fall into the well, he cannot help feeling alarm and commiseration.

SOURCE: Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (1993), p. 22.

The Ming dynasty also saw the beginning of regular contact with Europe, first with the Portuguese in 1514. But with these traders, and then with growing numbers of missionaries, the Chinese found little to admire and much resented the "barbaric manners" of most of their guests. In this early era of contact, failure to institute good relations with the Europeans, or to attempt to understand the world beyond China, set up the confrontational geopolitical environment of the colonial era, and became a prime reason for China's decline.

The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) again brought outsiders in control of China, this time in the form of the Manchurians, who continued the traditions of state administration. Confucian imperial ritual remained central to the state, and mastery of the classics was the basis for the examinations administered for the selection of the literati who ran it.

Confucian ideas and practices throughout China were strengthened by the *Sheng-tu* (*Pictures of the Sage's Traces*), captioned accounts of Confucius' life and exemplary tales of ethical practices. The stories appeared on stone tablets installed in temples (Daoist as well as Buddhist), on silk paintings, and in widely disseminated books. Many versions of the great teacher appeared, some with Confucius as a human being living an exemplary ethical life, others describing miracles and magic, and still others emphasizing the sage's commending great ritual exertions. Many of these publications were also exported to Japan, where they influenced the rapid development of Confucian studies and related arts in the Tokugawa era (1600–1868).

"If someone is a Confucian, give him Confucius; if he is a Daoist, give him Lao Zi; if he is a Buddhist, give him Shakyamuni; if he isn't any of them, give him their unity."

—Lin Zhao'en (1517–1598)

SOURCE: Timothy Brook, "Rethinking Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and Their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 21 (1993), p. 18.

## *Zen and the Shoguns (Twelfth to Nineteenth Centuries)*

In Japan during medieval and early modern times, there were no Daoist temples competing with institutional Buddhism or Shinto shrines, nor did the deities of "diffuse Chinese popular religion" find their way there. Instead, Shinto theologians presented the nation's deities in a uniquely Japanese pantheon, though the relationships between them varied by region and were not systematized nationwide until the modern era.

Zen Buddhism, however, also exerted an ecumenical influence in this period. The Zen school's strong relationship with China fostered studies in both Daoism and Confucianism. It also promoted the idea that Daoist concepts and Confucian morality could be harmoniously combined. Zen, the vehicle for Japan's cultural elite, adopted art forms from China, but Japanese masters soon took them to new levels of originality in such fields as ink painting, poetry, and tea ceremony.

Zen and the other Buddhist schools were closely tied to the ruling elites, who were a source of protection and patronage for their favorite monasteries and teachers. This relationship also led Buddhists in Japan to compete for support by the top upper classes, and this resulted in acceptance of their militaristic norms. The habit of overlooking discrepancies between Buddhist teachings and rulers' practices continued right into the modern period, when most monks were more concerned about accommodation with the elite than about teaching morality in Japanese society or preventing war.

One scene from the *Sheng-tu*, carved in marble in a Beijing temple, here depicting how a son should show filial piety (xiao) to his ailing mother.

**The Shoguns Persecute Christians and Promote Buddhism** Although Buddhism enjoyed official support during most of the shogunate, Nobunaga (1534–1582) waged an anti-Buddhist campaign, going so far as to burn the great monastery center on Mount Hiei, outside Kyoto, where Japanese Buddhism was first established. It was dislike of Buddhism that probably led Nobunaga to be receptive to the first Jesuit missionaries, giving Christianity more early support than it received anywhere else in East Asia. Much to the chagrin of the European missionaries, however, most Japanese had trouble seeing in Christianity anything but an obscure form of Buddhism: Catholic rituals appeared similar to certain monastic rites, and the concept of a heavenly Lord whose son became incarnate to serve humanity was not unlike Mahayana Buddhism's doctrine of the cosmic Buddha whose sons, the compassionate bodhisattvas, also served humanity.

But squabbles that developed among European Christians, as well as some missionary attempts to manipulate Japanese politics in the name of their home countries, convinced Iyesu (1543–1616), the first Tokugawa shogun, to outlaw Christianity in 1606. When in 1616 he expelled all remaining missionaries, there were already an estimated 300,000 Japanese converts. The next decades saw attempts by the Japanese state to root out Christianity. Some of these efforts were gruesome, and many converts who would not recant their faith were tortured. A Christian–government conflict in 1637–1638 that resulted in over 37,000 deaths confirmed for its Japanese opponents the disruptive potential of the foreign faith.

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Confucian

The Sage ideal of the Confucian tradition is indicated in a text that prescribes total commitment to truthfulness that, if fully put in practice, can be a path to cosmic harmony.

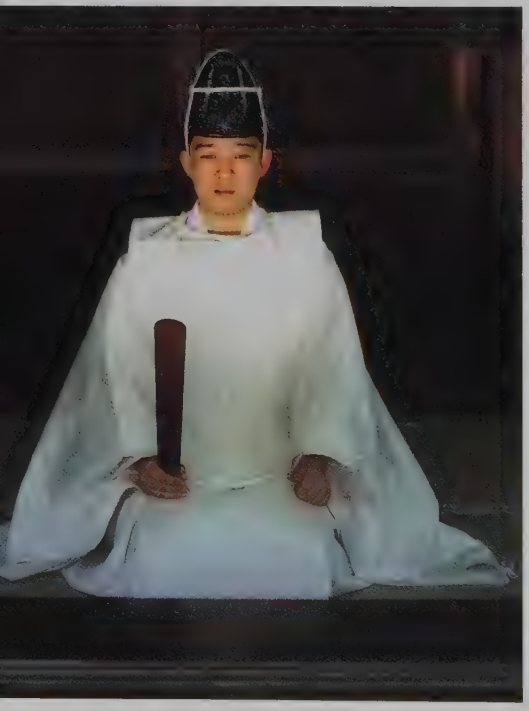
Only one who is perfectly truthful can give full realization to his human nature; able to give full realization to his human nature, he is then able to give full realization to the human nature of others; able to give full realization to the human nature of others, he is then able to give full realization to the nature of other creatures; able to give this, he can then assist in the transformative and nourishing processes of heaven and earth. If he can assist in the transformative and nourishing powers of heaven and earth, he can then form a triad with heaven and earth.

Source: *Maintaining Perfect Balance*, a neo-Confucian classic, in Daniel Gardiner, *The Four Books* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), p. 124.

From this time onward, every Japanese family was required by law to be registered with a Buddhist temple, in an effort to regularize ties with Buddhism and to emphasize that in Tokugawa times being Buddhist was inherently part of being Japanese. This position was to change dramatically, however, in the nineteenth century.

**The Regional Spread of Neo-Confucianism** Neo-Confucian thought spread under the Tokugawa shoguns. Confucianism finally found its own strong supporters in a succession of prominent Japanese philosophers, many of whom were not part of the samurai elite. For some, Confucian teachings gave those of lower birth ideals to uphold against the hierarchical system instituted by Japan's hereditary nobility. Unlike in China, the ideals of Confucianism spread among both the merchant class and the samurai, as Japanese intellectuals throughout the Tokugawa era studied and defended the positions of all the major neo-Confucian sages. Efforts were also made to rationalize Shinto beliefs with Confucian doctrines.

A Shinto priest at the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo.



# East Asian Religions in the Early Modern Era

## Disruptive European Intrusions

Post-Enlightenment colonialism, or imperialism, represents the first modern attempt to establish a global world order. Europeans forced Asian societies to change on European terms, abruptly imposing new ideas, technologies, and

institutions that had evolved naturally over many years in Europe. European imperialism undermined most institutions in premodern East Asia, with organized religions especially subject to disruption and decline.

Colonialism was a brutal enterprise at times. It forcibly changed every regional economy, promoted trafficking in narcotics when the opium trade was profitable, challenged East Asians' fundamental understandings regarding humanity and cosmos through science and Christian missions, and undermined the long-held view of Asia's ruling classes that their civilizations were the world's greatest.

The crisis of colonialism forced East Asian elites to contend with the Western world and its technologies. From about 1850, across the region the best minds in East Asia chose to learn about the West first and about their own traditions hardly at all, with the result that the Enlightenment mentality infiltrated the cultural heritage of modern East Asia. Among a large portion of this Western-influenced elite, agnosticism or atheism replaced belief in their own indigenous spiritual traditions.

It would be wrong, however, to see the history of modern East Asia as dictated solely by European actors and external forces. Important internal dynamics were at work in Korea, China, and Japan, and the different processes already underway in each shaped their different destinies under colonialism. Finally, though the effects of colonialism were overwhelmingly destructive, the fusion of older traditions with modern changes led to a number of religious innovations that were compelling and original.

## Traumatic Transitions of the Modern Era

The era of colonialism was perceived across Asia as a time of repeated crises. The common terms used to express the peoples' sense of inundation and powerlessness across East Asia convey this: *humiliation* (*chî*) in Chinese, *bitterness* (*hahn*) in Korean, and *patient endurance* (*nin*) in Japanese. Although each nation had differing reactions to the experience of modernization, it is essential to appreciate the great magnitude of colonial-era disruptions to understand the changes in religious life across East Asia.

### *The Decline of Confucian Ideology and Exponents*

The rapid changes brought by imperialism ended the influence of the Confucian elite in China, Korea, and Japan. The Confucian worldview and social ideology were subjected to critiques by the native-born reformers of each nation, who attempted to save state sovereignty and match the wealth, knowledge, and power displayed by the Western colonizers. In addition, many young people abandoned the traditional curriculum to pursue "Western learning" and increasingly critique the Confucian tradition. Finally, the fall of the Korean and Chinese states, whose political and economic resources supported Confucianism, caused this tradition to lose its central place in the region's early modernization.

Confucianism was now blamed for every problem. The failure to develop modern trade was blamed on the classical ranking of social classes by occupation, which in the

Confucian view of the good society placed scholar-officials at the top and merchants at the bottom. (It is true that Confucius had no respect for merchants, whom he called "parasites.")

The traditional Confucian educational system was also blamed for stifling the nation's technical development, inasmuch as it rewarded rote memorization and imitation, not independent thinking. Critics also argued that the Confucian view of history as cyclical had made the elite disinclined to pursue innovation or progress.

The strongest terms of rejection were directed toward Confucian social norms and, at their center, family relations. Reformers found these rigid relationships to be an obstacle to modernization in many respects. Individuals who placed loyalty to family first, for example, were unable to extend trust to others as needed in a modern economy. Similarly, filial deference to elders made individuals dependent on the collective family, thwarting creativity and giving too much power to those who were merely of senior rank. Until the 1970s, generations of both East Asian reformers and Western social scientists agreed that Confucianism was the key obstacle to the region's modernization.

A reconsideration of the characteristics fostered by Confucianism, however, suggests that these aspects of Confucian culture also played a major role in the region's ultimately successful response to the challenges of the postcolonial era. These include, for example, the emphasis on education, the practice of carefully studying problems before taking action, the expectation that state officials will act for the good of the whole, and the intellectual elite's acceptance of responsibility for the nation's well-being. But what is certain is that the imperial system that supported the Confucian literati tradition was overthrown completely in China and Korea. By contrast, in neighboring Japan, there is a very different history: the emperor-led state after 1868 melded nationalism and Confucianism to modernize and begin its own form of colonialism in Asia. Whatever Confucianism means exactly in the present day, a break with the past had irrevocably occurred. To examine this, we must first turn to the important exception of Japan and its distinctive fusion of belief systems: melding modernization with Confucianism in the form of nationalist neo-Shintoism.

### *State and Civil Religion in Japan: Neo-Shintoism*

By 1882, fifteen years after the restoration of the Japanese monarchy in the person of the Meiji emperor, the Shinto tradition was officially adopted as the state religion. To bring this about, most shrines and temples were now, for the first time, integrated into a single system under government supervision. The emperor was revered as a divinity on earth, whose presence was a blessing to the nation. This idea was expressed at the national shrines in the capital and then in rituals regularly conducted at every local shrine as well; Japanese were directed to worship daily facing the emperor in Tokyo, just as Muslims worshipping Allah face Mecca. The reformed educational system also centered its curriculum on the sanctity of the emperor, and all citizens were expected to honor him by working for the good of the nation. This was a central Confucian element in Japan's modernization.

A constitution adopted in 1889 limited Japanese citizens' freedom to express any opinions critical of Shinto doctrines and practices, especially the imperial ties to the indigenous deities, but it guaranteed religious freedom to followers of other religions as long as they did not undermine Shinto and were loyal to the nation. Those affected included Buddhists and Christians, as well as the new religion sects that multiplied throughout the early modern era.

The Meiji state religion, or **state Shinto**, can be labeled **neo-Shintoism**, for it was associated with the ancient religious tradition that reveres the indigenous deities of the Japanese islands. However, the "civil religion" constructed around Shintoism by the Meiji elite was thoroughly Confucian in character. It emphasized loyalty to the state, filial piety, self-sacrifice, and dedication. Moreover, it heralded the contributions of every individual that would be needed to make the modernization of Japan a success. Finally, a Confucian vocabulary was used to define the emperor's and the nation's mission, with special emphasis on the emperor's Mandate of Heaven. Thus, Meiji Japan was the first political entity in East Asia that harnessed reformed Confucian values to meet the challenges of modernizing, while adopting the technologies pioneered in the West.

**neo-Shintoism/state Shinto:** reformation of Japan's indigenous religion after 1869, with the divine emperor at its center

## *Institutional Buddhism*

As we noted in Chapter 7, institutional Buddhism took root in Asia by way of a monastic system in which monasteries became landlords who relied on lay farmers to tend the crops and on charitable donations from the faithful. At times of economic hardship or when the state could not extend customary protections, Buddhism declined. In general, the crises of the modern era across East Asia weakened support for Buddhist institutions and deprived Buddhist monasteries of new monks and nuns. Instead, the most gifted people now wanted to learn about the West and to lead their countries in modernizing national industries, governments, and military establishments.

In nineteenth-century China, there were few signs of innovation and few Buddhists who rose to contribute to the national struggles. In Japan's long Tokugawa era (1600–1867), on the other hand, the military leaders supported Buddhism strongly, including the promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage as a means of having the Japanese acquire a sense of national integration. But the Meiji reformers felt it essential to reverse course, both to weaken pro-Buddhist foes and because they believed that Buddhist influences were contrary to Japan's Shinto-centered revitalization. These challenges to institutional Buddhism forced followers to shift their emphases and rethink their doctrines, and Buddhist leaders tried to prove their patriotism and the faith's relevance to the country's modernization. Major Buddhist schools

Procession bearing the local god (kami) through Kamakura, Japan, during the Spring Festival.

competed to implement Meiji social and national programs, and they, too, fanned the rising flame of anti-Western feelings.

Compared with elsewhere in Asia, early movements led by Japanese householders to reinterpret Buddhism in terms of modern philosophy were few. Instead, religious reformers were more likely to found new sects, drawing on doctrines as they liked, without trying to work through the Buddhist establishment.

In Korea, Confucianism was more strongly supported in the nineteenth century, and Buddhism was increasingly marginalized, as the government also tried to limit the economic power of monastic estates by consolidating schools and seizing lands. State decrees went so far as to prohibit Buddhist monks from even entering major cities.

The same observations about Chinese monastic Buddhism in the modern era apply to Daoist monasticism as well. The institutions carried on, but they brought little to the discussion about creating the new China in the radical intellectual climate of the early twentieth century. Daoism, too, was attacked from the standpoints of science and democracy.

### *Later Christian Missions in China, Japan, Korea*

The Jesuits, members of a Catholic religious order, were the first Christians to proselytize in Ming China, focused on the elite, not the masses, for conversion. Unlike their counterparts in Japan, who were expelled after an era of toleration, the Jesuits did succeed at winning imperial approval for their presence. The Chinese were far more interested in the Jesuits' knowledge of European sciences (particularly astronomy, mathematics, and ballistics) than they were in Christianity, however. Missionary efforts were also hampered by the bitter controversies that broke out between Jesuit and Dominican Catholics, particularly on the issue of whether to tolerate Confucian morality or ancestor veneration. An imperial edict banned Christianity in 1724, but this censure was not as thoroughly enforced as in Japan.

The Protestant presence was significant only after 1800. Their missionary efforts were directed to the masses, and a Chinese translation of the complete Bible appeared in 1815. As elsewhere, however, the missionaries were less successful at mass proselytizing than at transmitting Western medicine, schooling, and new technologies. By 1877, there were 347 missionary schools and an estimated 400,000 Chinese converts.

Outlawed in Japan in 1606, its missionaries expelled in 1616, and its followers violently persecuted, Christianity survived there underground among remarkably faithful converts. Once granted religious freedom in 1863, Japanese Christians built churches and publicly asserted their faith. Soon, however, the Christians, like the Buddhists, began feeling the need to prove their religion's nationalistic credentials. They supported the war efforts launched by the state and proclaimed that Christianity strengthened Japan by supporting ethics in national life, resisting radicalism, and combating communism.

Scenes from missionary life in China: an American family resident in China ca. 1898 shown in formal Chinese dress; a classroom in a Methodist boarding school for girls; a group of Chinese converts and missionaries with shipments of Bibles and evangelical publications.

Korea remained closed to Christian missionaries until the late nineteenth century, when representatives primarily from American Methodist and Presbyterian denominations settled and attracted converts, building churches as well as schools and hospitals. Korean Christians, like those in Japan, also have had to prove their patriotism by emphasizing their independence from Western churches. Scholars are still uncertain as to why Korea embraced Christianity so much more readily than other Asian countries. (Latest surveys have found that 32 percent of South Koreans are Christians.)

## The Appearance of New Religious Movements and Religions

From the imperial era until the present, "**new religions**" have emerged across Asia, underscoring this period as one of social dislocation, dissatisfaction, and new syntheses of religious ideas and practices. It also signals the extent to which the "established religions" of the region (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) had lost their allure for some who were increasingly drawn to ideas from the West.

**"new religions":** new sects formed since the nineteenth century combining elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism with ideas imported from the West

For the majority of peasants and artisans, the crises that resulted from foreign domination were a disaster for local subsistence economies. Non-elites continued to have faith in their own deities, shamans, and ancestors and, indeed, turned to them in times of trouble. Yet given the turmoil of the modern era, it is not hard to imagine that countless rituals failed and a great many prayers went unanswered. For all these reasons, the modern era in East Asia is marked by the unprecedented flowering of

"new religious movements" that did not rely on old deities, institutions, or rituals. Most often, they arose from the lower classes through sects entirely independent of the traditional institutions of Daoism, Buddhism, and (premodern) Shinto.

**Taiping Rebellion:** violent revolt led by Chinese converts to Christianity, who established a separate state with its capital in Nanjing

**Hong Xiuquan:** charismatic instigator of the Taiping Rebellion; claimed to be younger brother of Jesus

## *Taiping Rebellion in China (1850–1864)*

In China, a nineteenth-century rebellion led by a Chinese convert to Christianity nearly ended Manchu rule. Known as the **Taiping Rebellion,** it began with a humble and failed village scholar, **Hong Xiuquan** (1814–1864).

After an illness during which he was delirious for several weeks, Hong, with the help of an American Southern Baptist missionary, interpreted his fevered visions as Christian revelations. Despite limited knowledge of the Bible, Hong established his own form of Christianity, convinced that he had seen God, who had charged him with saving humanity and destroying demons, and that he had met Jesus, who was revealed to be Hong's "older brother." A charismatic preacher whose apocalyptic predictions captured the imagination of many, Hong organized his followers into a militant sect called the *Taipings*. Although the Western missionaries rejected his teachings, to some Chinese they offered a prophetic, utopian vision of a future "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" based on egalitarianism, shared property, and gender equality. One of his Old Testament–inspired proclamations was that all idols be destroyed, be they Buddhist, Daoist, or even Confucian ancestor tablets. He also insisted that those joining his group adopt a puritanical moral code, abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and opium.

Hong vilified the Manchu elite as demons standing in the way of the sect's radical transformation of China. The Qing state, in turn, persecuted the group, stepping up its efforts after 1850, by which time the Taipings had over 10,000 members. Thus provoked, Hong gathered an army whose bloody campaigns likely comprised the most destructive civil war in world history. Most of China was affected, and an estimated 20 million people perished. The Taiping army captured Nanjing in 1853 and occupied it for ten years, establishing a separate, regional state ruled by Hong and his neo-Christian ministers.

Ultimately, however, the movement fell apart owing to internal divisions, refusal to cooperate with potential allies, the leadership's ruthless brutality and paranoia in governing the Taiping community, and their hostility to the Confucian elements deeply embedded in China's population. Nanjing was retaken in 1864, all Taiping leaders not killed in battle were executed, and the first Asian-Christian new religion was utterly eradicated.

## *"Religion of the Heavenly Way": Ch'ondogyo in Korea*

**Ch'ondogyo:** Korean movement reaffirming the truth of human dignity and the vitality of Daoism and Confucianism

The **Ch'ondogyo** tradition merges elements of Confucianism, Daoism, shamanism, and Roman Catholicism. It was founded by Ch'oe Suun (1824–1864) in 1860. Its original name, *Tonghak* ("Eastern learning"), signals its origins as an indigenous response to the challenge of newly imported Christianity (called "Western learning" in Korean). According to the sect's scriptures, Suun received a direct revelation of a new "Heavenly Way" (*Ch'ondo*) designed to awaken each person to the totality of

life in the universe and the divinity immanent in each person and all creation. Sunn was inspired to reverence the Ultimate Reality, that he called *Hanullim*, an impersonal force with whom each person can have a direct connection.

In Ch'ondogyo, the essential path to individual realization is through repetitive private and communal chanting. To invoke Hanullim to enter into personal awareness, the "21-syllable Incantation" is intoned. Weekly ceremonies, rituals centered on prayer, and the focus on a single God reflect Christian influences on Ch'ondogyo. Similar borrowing is seen in its drawing on Confucianism for ethical principles and on Korea's folk religion for the communal rituals.

Suun organized his new religion on the notion that those who shared belief in that one God and worshipped as he specified constituted a separate and distinct community within Korean society. Suun attracted a large following, but his conflicts with Korean leaders led to his being martyred by the government. The Ch'ondogyo continued to grow under Suun's successors, however, becoming one of the major religions of the Korean peninsula. Ch'ondogyo appealed especially to the lower classes, who were told that they, along with scholars and high officials, could achieve salvation through disciplined effort. Like Korean Christians, Ch'ondogyo members were active in resisting Japanese rule.

Although banned in North Korea since 1949, recent reports mention its survival there, and the group remains very popular in the south. There is an institutional center in Seoul, and in 2005, its membership, governed by an elected body, was reported to number over 3 million.

The collected writings of the first three leaders became the sect's chief scriptures. But Ch'ondogyo's theology is expressed in one simple phrase: "Humans bear divinity." The ethics of the sect emphasize respecting this universal divinity in others. The injunction "Treat others as divine" seems tame today yet was revolutionarily democratic in the status-conscious Korea of the late nineteenth century. A heaven-like earthly existence marked by widespread social cooperation is their utopian goal.

Ch'ondogyo has undergone a decline in the first decades of the twenty-first century, resulting from a lack of recruitment, aging congregations, difficulty in retention, and a dearth of economic resources.

Ultimate Energy being all around me, I pray that I feel that Energy within me here and now. Recognizing that Hanullim is within me, I will be transformed. Constantly aware of that divine presence within, I will become attuned to all that is going on around me.

—Ch'ondogyo incantation

SOURCE: Robert Buswell Jr., ed., *Religions of Korea in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 450.

## *Older "New Religions" in Pre-Meiji Japan*

By the end of the Tokugawa era, the medieval social order in Japan had begun to break down, and for some, the vitality of Buddhism and traditional Confucianism had waned. Several dozen spiritual movements arose in this period, but three grew to become denominations among the postmodern "new religions" of the early twenty-first century.

Each of these movements began with a charismatic individual who experienced extraordinary revelations after a serious illness. Having shared their discoveries with others, these leaders began building communities of followers who felt the teachings helped them reorder their lives on new spiritual principles. Almost every new religion thus offered a path to salvation out of the maze of choices that had developed during

"True Sincerity is the one thing
we must be most thankful for;
with sincerity alone the Earth can be a family.
In this world of ours
we have come together to form a circle; let us pray to be joined by the Heart of all our hearts."

—Munetada, founder of Kurozumikyo[5]

Japanese religious history: Buddhism, neo-Confucianism, elements of Daoism, and Shinto. All later were harmonized with the Meiji state's neo-Shintoism, eventually becoming regarded as "Shinto sects." Two of the more prominent Shinto sects are Kurozumikyo and Tenrikyo.

**Kurozumikyo** ***Kurozumikyo*** ("Kurozumi's religion") was founded by Kurozumi Munetada (1780–1850), a charismatic teacher who in 1815 was possessed by the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu, whom he asserted to be the single Lord of the Universe. Soon after his initial experience, he began preaching and attracting disciples, who spread his revelations across Japan.

Followers of Kurozumikyo believe that all humans are emanations of the kami gods and that individual believers may become kami, or become one with them, and thus securing eternal life, by adopting the moral and spiritual practices of these Japanese deities. The potential for all to realize the divine state explains the Kurozumikyo emphasis on the equality of all people, a radical idea in pre-Meiji Japan, where class completely determined individual destiny.

Kurozumikyo grew dramatically after winning Meiji recognition. Its leaders had a central shrine established in Okayama City, and the group numbered perhaps 700,000 by 1880. In 2010, 361 centers were counted in Japan, and its membership had dropped to just more than 200,000.

**Tenrikyo:** Tenrikyo ("Religion of Heavenly Wisdom"), a Shinto sect founded sect in 1838, taught that traditional dance ritual, initiation, and daily social service were essential to salvation

**Tenrikyo** **Tenrikyo** ("Religion of Heavenly Wisdom") began with messages its founder, Nakayama Miki (1798–1887), received while in a trance. The source of these communications, he reported, was a spirit Nakayama called *Oyagami* ("God the Parent"). Regarded by followers as the one true god of the universe, Oyagami commanded Nakayama to be his medium and to further his mission through healing and preaching.

Tenrikyo claimed that its newly released universal doctrine of harmonious living would usher in a new world order, a divine kingdom in which humanity would enjoy blissful union with God the Parent. In the sect's view, the "one, true kami" in the universe had created humanity to see it find harmonious life and then entered into creation in the form of ten other kami. Tenrikyo adherents believe that Oyagami made his new revelation to Nakayama to rectify growing human selfishness, a shortcoming that has undermined the original divine intent.

Founded by Nakayama Miki (1798-1880), Tenrikyo became a recognized Shinto sect in 1838 and rapidly spread throughout Japan. Like the other Shinto-related sects, after the Second World War the group made efforts to "purify" Tenrikyo of its Shinto and nationalist associations. By 2013, there were over 2.75 million members, who had established over 17,000 centers in Japan, with an additional 20,000 mission centers worldwide.

### *Nichiren-Related Sects of the Meiji Era*

As the Meiji reforms opened and transformed Japanese society after 1868 and government calls to modernize Japan multiplied, the spirit of renewal found Buddhist expression as well. Numerous laity-led groups arose because the Buddhist "establishment"

offered few opportunities for those wishing to reinterpret the doctrines or to apply them in the context of modern scientific discoveries from the West. Many modern groups formed in association with the Nichiren school, with its focus on the *Lotus Sutra*'s teachings of compassion and interconnectivity as inspiration to engage with modern problems.

**Soka Gakkai:** twentieth-century offshoot from the Nichiren school, now a global Buddhist organization seeking world peace

**Soka Gakkai** Directly stemming from this school is the largest new religion of modern Japan, the householder-led lay organization called ***Soka Gakkai*** ("Value Creation Society"). Established formally near the end of World War II by the Nichiren disciple and educator Makiguchi Tsunesaburo (1877–1944), the Soka Gakkai aims to foster a "Third Civilization" based on Nichiren's teachings, one in which the true Buddhism would spread throughout the world. Its members believe that repeatedly chanting the *Nam-Myoho-renge-kyo* (the name of the great Buddhist text, the *Lotus Sutra*) is a means for changing the world. The Soka Gakkai also considers its mission to work for world peace and human welfare, and after 1960, it established a political party in Japan (the Komeito) to achieve this goal there. It has also sent missionaries to every major country of the world. By 2013, the Soka Gakkai had registered 12 million Japanese members and claimed 1.4 million international adherents.

**Reiyukai Kyodan** Also originated by and for Nichiren laity, ***Reiyukai Kyodan*** ("Spiritual Friends Association") was founded in 1925 by Kubo Kakutaro (1892–1944) and Kotani Kimi (1901–1971). Emphasizing ancestor worship, the group attributed the upheavals of the era to ancestral distress over the ineffectiveness of the contemporary Buddhist leaders. The Reiyukai also emphasizes conservative social values and expects its members to work hard to strengthen the Confucian "three bonds" (between ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife). In addition, the Reiyukai are strong supporters of imperial veneration and other conservative causes in Japanese society. One of the most active proselytizing new religions, the Reiyukai by 2018 had 5 million members and centers abroad in twenty-six countries.

## East Asian Religions and Postmodern Trends in a Postcolonial World

At the center of the East Asian region, China in 1949 became a Communist country. The officially atheistic Communist Party immediately instituted policies of sustained religious repression with the result that Chinese religions suffered destruction of properties and the dissolution of their religious institutions as the governmental attempted to exterminate any vestige of traditional religious teaching or spiritual training. In China, this repression reached its height during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

As was the case elsewhere, however, the secular state in China, even with its persecutions, did not extinguish religion. Far from it, in fact. State-enforced study of modernist

Marxist ideologies, its utopian mythology, and the orchestration of a personality cult centered on Mao Zedong represented attempts to substitute a communist Chinese civil religion for Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. The effort failed, though it did weaken the bond between most mainland Chinese and their traditional organized religions.

Since the reform era that began soon after the death of Mao in 1976, the gradual restoration of religion in China has proceeded under the supervision of the state. A popular upsurge of practice at Daoist temples, family graves, Buddhist monasteries, Christian churches, and mosques is evident, however. Countless Chinese have seized the opportunity to make pilgrimages, reopen shrines, and resume the ritual practices of their ancestors. We discuss here both the status of surviving traditions and how new religions have multiplied the unprecedented pluralism characteristic of the postcolonial era.

## Continuities and Transformations in the East Asian Religions

A knowledgeable visitor to Osaka, Seoul, or Shanghai today would be intrigued to see how traditions endure amid signs of extraordinary changes: Shinto shrines tucked into spaces between skyscrapers; new Confucius Institutes being built by the Chinese government; Buddhist television stations broadcasting from corporate headquarters in Korea. New religions are being formed, even as old ritual practices are being applied to new human problems. As global awareness is further influencing East Asian religions, they are also expanding Asian communities and institutions across the globe. These trends now merit our attention.

### *The Reality of Gods and Spirits in China*

Ancient Chinese myths mention deities of mountains, rivers, rain, and the earth that have remained part of the diffuse Chinese religion. Interestingly, most deities appearing

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Daoist

This Daoist tale describes how Zhuang Zi learned from his wife's death and explained his spiritual realization to a friend who discovered him drumming and singing instead of maintaining the expected decorum of solemn mourning:

I pondered over her beginning before she was born; not merely before she was born but when there was as yet no body; not merely when there was no body but not even a vital spirit. Within an inchoate confusion there took forth a transformation and there was vital spirit. The vital spirit was transformed and there came forth form, and with the transformation there was life. Now once again there is a transformation and she died. What happened may be compared to the four seasons. . . . Now she is lying in peace in a small room. For me to follow after her weeping and wailing would be an indication that I have no thorough understanding of human destiny.

Source: D. Howard Smith, ed., *The Wisdom of the Taoists* (New York: New Directions, 1980), p. 88.

Representations of the "triple gods"—Blessings, Wealth, and Longevity—found on many altars in Chinese homes, restaurants, and temples.

later in East Asia have human origins, as heroic ancestral spirits have become gods. This is true of **Guan Yu**, the god of war (in real life, a Han dynasty general), and of various deified statesmen, Confucius, and even, in recent years, Mao Zedong. Most other important deities have been Buddhist in origin.

In regional and local contexts, the East Asian pantheon has always been in flux as new heroes arise and the deities are obliged continuously to show their power (***ling***) to prove themselves worthy of further offerings. Those manifesting strong healing powers or success in responding to popular appeals win devotees, patrons, and new temples. Alternatively, inactive deities have faded from popularity. Thus, the East Asian understanding of divinities has been based more on their record of effectiveness and less on faith.

Image of Mazu, the protective deity worshipped along the Chinese seacoast.

The most common deities found on altars in Chinese homes and temples are icons of the "triple gods": Longevity, in the form of a vigorous old man; Wealth, embodied by a Confucian official; and Blessings, symbolized by a male god holding a baby boy.

Another prominent deity, Tian Shang Sheng-mu ("Holy Mother in Heaven"), is popularly known as ***Mazu*** ("Grandmother"). Her origins can be traced to a girl born in the ninth century who saved her father and brothers at sea

Daoist practitioners meditating in a cave in Jinhua, China.

by exercising magical powers acquired via Daoist practice. She died young, and soon apparitions and miracles attributed to her were reported. By the mid-twelfth century, the state had recognized Tian Shang Sheng-mu/Mazu, as temples spread along the eastern coast of China, where the goddess remains popular today.

**kitchen god:** in China and Korea, deity residing in every household

In the kitchen of every traditional Chinese and Korean home (but not in Japan) is a figure of the deity Zao Wangye, the **kitchen god**. He records the household goings on and composes a yearly report right before New Year's Day. Individual kitchen gods and earth gods of each community were believed to present these records to the nearby city gods, who in turn informed the celestial Jade Emperor on New Year's Day. This notion of a divine, hierarchical officialdom reflects popular understanding in China of what happens when a person dies: The earth god of the locality reports to the city god, who then escorts the soul to the underworld to appear before ten judges who determine punishments and karmic destiny.

**Guan Yu:** Chinese god of war, worshipped for protection today

**Mazu:** popular goddess of coastal China

## *Ritual Practices*

In many respects, East Asia derives its unity as a religious and cultural area from the shared ritual practices in its temples and at family graves. These rituals are an extension of the human custom of feasting an honored guest, in these cases an ancestral spirit or a deity. Along with food and drink, other items presented in East Asian rituals include candles, flowers, oil lamps, and incense. In keeping with the idea that the deities are senior but essentially human is the practice of full prostration (*ketou*, or "kowtow") before icons or tablets, a gesture of respect that junior kin also make before their living elders at festival times.

**ling:** spiritual force possessed by geographic places, deities, and sages

For most occasions in daily life, priests (be they Daoist, Buddhist, or shamans) are not needed. This is because senior householders and state officials, even at the highest

level, have ritual tasks to perform according to their status. In particular, Confucian filial piety is shown at a parent's death through careful performance of the appropriate rituals. The reward is the soul-spirit's blessings and the promise of a reunion with kin after the children's own demise.

Participation in a funeral is one of the key events binding families and transmitting family values. The funeral itself involves the largest and most ostentatious procession that can be afforded, with musicians and mourners carrying large paper replicas of items the deceased is expected to need in the afterlife. The traditional death rituals end with the priests ritually transferring the soul to two places for future worship, inviting it to reunite with the previously deceased ancestors. The cremation remains are brought in a procession to the family grave or clan temple. Here, they are left in an urn, and a grave tablet with the deceased's name is written. The yin (earthly) soul stays with these remains. The yang (heavenly) soul is carried to the family's home and ritually installed on the family altar as a permanent tablet inscribed with the person's name is set in place. On the altar near tablets for other senior kin and images of various deities, this spirit receives all the offerings made to the gods. Moreover, any important event in the family is announced to the tablets as if the ancestors resided there.

Although not all can afford family gravesites, all wish to have them, since with such a burial, the family can most directly ensure the happiness of the earthbound souls. Some Buddhist temples in Japan cultivated family patronage by creating cemeteries on their grounds. Families possessing graves go to them on two occasions each year to tidy them, make offerings, and then eat and drink among the family's ancestral graves. Thus, cemeteries in East Asia are not dreaded locales but places one can go to feel close to one's deceased kin, as well as to conform to the basic Confucian requirement of caring for them after death.

Items for burning to be sent to the dead by the affluent Chinese of Shanghai and Singapore.

## The Religious Institutions: Monasteries, Temples, Shrines

The religious institutions that sustain the three traditions in East Asia vary widely. For their surrounding householder communities, Buddhist monasteries have temples with images of compassionate bodhisattvas and include monks who specialize in healing and death rituals. The temple in all these religions is considered as simply a house for humanlike divinities. They can be modest roadside boxes where humble images are kept, or they can be massive palaces housing gilded images flanked by hosts of attending demigods.

The larger temples in China share certain characteristics. The aesthetic in them is highly baroque: with curving roof lines and eaves, every beam and column painted with bright colors, decorations bright with gold surfaces, the statues wearing silk vestments. The greatest Chinese temples actually contain shrines dedicated to most of the major deities of the pantheon. The entrance always opens to the south, an auspicious direction, and is guarded by statues of protectors. In larger establishments, these guardians are lodged in a gatehouse through which all visitors must pass. In larger compounds, the main deity will be in the last hall on the same axis as the entrance, with halls containing lesser deities arrayed on the same line and separated by courtyards. Before each icon is an altar for receiving offerings, most commonly candles or incense sticks. Kneeling cushions are supplied as well as a means of divination for posing questions to a deity: Two half-moon wooden blocks are thrown to derive a "yes" or "no" answer, based on their resting alignment.

The larger Daoist temples are usually served by a resident priesthood and by spirit mediums. The latter specialize in exorcisms and help private clients make offerings. Resident priests may assist in rituals such as exorcisms but have also mastered complex Daoist death liturgies and wear more formal attire.

Japanese Shinto shrines (*jinja*) are notable for their natural wood, plain roof tiles, and restrained aesthetic. Every jinja entrance is also marked by a gateway called a *torii*. Given the emphasis on purification in Shintoism, water sources for rinsing the face and mouth are always present where devotees approach the main shrine; these distinctive features of Japan's Shinto architecture delineate a transition from the ordinary world into sacred space. After purification, devotees proceed to the main and subsidiary shrines. Facing the main icon, they present their petitions. Before making a request, a visitor rings a bell hung in front of the shrine. Ending the ritual by clapping twice shows respect.

### *The Diffuse Religion in Practice: The Major Religious Festivals*

In our discussion of the religious practices of China, Korea, and Japan, we have pointed to the diffuse religion that gives the region a characteristic unity, drawing on elements of the three traditions. Festivals express this most clearly, since Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist elements have been woven into the yearly cycle of religious life. The globally familiar Chinese system of twelve-year cycles, lunar days, and solar

## GENDER FOCUS: Women and East Asian Religions

In the Asian traditions, the great sages are all male, as are the preponderance of major gods. The great monastic traditions that were formed by Buddhists and Daoists all rendered nuns as secondary figures who exerted little institutional control. This pattern of religious traditions providing legitimation for gender inequality is also clearly seen in Confucian thought, which held that the control of women by men is necessary to establish a harmonious society. The fact that men are instructed to act in ways to deserve this power by ensuring the flourishing of women and girls does not alter the reality of male control. Nor did the doctrines of the Daoists, seeing harmony in the universe based on a balancing of yin and yang, including male and female, exert any counterforce to the gender hierarchy found across East Asia.

In China, the subjugation of women found extraordinary expression in the practice of women binding their feet. Widespread in Chinese society from 1000 CE until the mid-twentieth century, this custom involved the excruciatingly painful process of young girls (ages five through seven) having the bones of their toes and arches broken, then bound in place inward, creating an incapacitating deformity. Scholars have interpreted foot binding as an expression of gender relations in conformity with the dominant neo-Confucian tradition. Although this contradicts a central ethical principle of this tradition that prohibits bodily mutilation, this prohibition seems to have been applied to men alone. Instead, foot binding was part of the male-regulated family, in which bound feet rendered women dependent on their families, particularly their men, and became a symbol of chastity and male ownership.

Attention to gender and the male control of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism makes it especially understandable that women were drawn to the hundreds of new religions established across East Asia. Many were founded, supported by, and to a greater extent than in the older faiths, run by women. Under conditions of modernity, women seeking power, prestige, and careers outside the traditional boundaries of family life found many new options in these new religions that cultivated their membership. The changing familial, educational, and economic conditions for women seen across Asia today are also forcing the long-established religions to reform their institutions to attract females as devotees.

A Japanese woman makes offerings to her recently departed father at a gravesite located in a Buddhist monastery in Tokyo.

(left) Chinese temple, the home of the gods, featuring the ornate pillars and roof tiles of the palace style. (right) Main gate, or torii, of the Fushimi Inari Shinto Shrine in Kyoto, Japan.

seasons is still used in many areas and has been intermixed with the Western calendar. Indicative of its rapid Westernization in the nineteenth century, Japan shifted most of its holidays away from the Chinese calendar and adopted fixed "Western" days.

National holidays have grown out of a variety of origins: mythic events or deities indigenous to the particular nation, days accentuating Confucian values, or relatively recent events that the nation's leaders wish to mark in the country's "civil religion." For example, Japan celebrates the Cherry Blossom Festival (April 1–8) to thank the kami of the forests for the renewal of life seen in the blossoming of the trees.

Every major deity in every locality is thought to have a "birthday" each year, either a day celebrated nationally or the day a more local deity's temple was first established. On these annual occasions, the priests and temple supporters arrange for ritual performances, local devotees make offerings (and ritual petitions), merchants and artisans sell their wares, and theatrical performances are staged to entertain deity and devotees alike.

Most of the great festivals of East Asia have Chinese or Buddhist origins. New Year's Day is a time for gathering family and friends, settling debts, and seeking blessings and divine protection for the year ahead. The day in China and Korea is called *Spring Festival*, though it falls usually just after the middle of winter. In traditional preholiday rites, householders send the kitchen god (Zao Wangye) off to heaven by burning his paper icon and installing a new paper icon; they also post ancient characters on doorways to invite prosperity for the year ahead. The essentials of Confucian family life are marked by offerings carefully laid out for the ancestors at their tablets. It is customary for junior family members to kowtow to seniors, who then in turn receive gifts of money from their elders placed in special red envelopes.

A small Shinto shrine (jinja) dedicated to the protector of cows, the cow kami.

Usually in early April, Ancestor's Day, or **Qing-Ming** ("Pure Brightness Festival"), is the first of two dates over the year when families must visit the ancestral graves to maintain them, make sacrifices, and feast there with the departed spirits. In Japan, this festival has been fixed as the vernal equinox (March 21) and is called *Higan* ("Further Shore"), with a second Higan on the autumnal equinox. Buddhist priests are also expected to come to the home on a short visit, during which they recite sacred scriptures. The merit earned for this good deed is dedicated to the dead.

**Qing-Ming:** annual spring festival when Chinese tend to family graves and make offerings to the ancestors

Japanese Buddhists mark the Buddha's birthday on April 8, when people anoint images of baby Buddha with flowers and scented water, just as the texts describe the local deities doing at the actual birth of Siddhartha. Chinese and Korean Buddhists do the same on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month. Confucius' birthday is celebrated today only in Korea and always on September 28. In Taiwan, on Teacher's Day, Confucius is honored with colorful rituals and elaborate sacrifices laid out before the sage's temple tablets.

Daoist New Year celebrations in Beijing.

**All Souls Festival:** summer event when families perform rituals to connect the living with their ancestors and ensure ancestors' comfort in the afterlife

**All Souls Festival** is a summer event when the gates of purgatory are thought to be momentarily held open. On this occasion, families integrate practices from all three traditions to connect the living members with their departed kin. Buddhist and Daoist priests perform rituals to aid families in their effort to ensure their ancestors' comfort in the afterlife.

Scene in Chengudu, China, from the Qing-Ming festival, the yearly family ritual for feasting and honoring the ancestors.

The early fall **Full Moon Festival** is a time to worship the harvest moon, also known as the "full rabbit moon." In the popular Buddhist scriptures, the future Buddha in an earlier life was born as a rabbit who rendered such extraordinary service to a sage that the gods placed his image on the moon's surface; in the Daoist perception, a rabbit can be seen on the moon using a pestle to pound the herbs of immortality in a mortar. Across East Asia, people view the rising full moon on this night to ask for blessings that, in rural communities, include a good rice harvest in the month ahead.

**Full Moon Festival:** fall festival to feast with kin and celebrate the harvest moon

## The Return of Religion to China: Case Studies

Between 1949 and 1976, the Communist Party–led government of China dispersed the religious specialists (monks, nuns, and priests) and destroyed much of the formal infrastructure of the organized religions of China, demolishing Buddhist and Daoist monasteries and image shrines as well as the deity temples that until then could be found in every community. The Party also pushed religion underground, since in the most active phase of the **Cultural Revolution** (1966–1969), any attempt to pray, meditate, or read religious literature was potentially a capital crime. We now examine a few examples in pursuit of understanding the extraordinary phenomenon of religion's return to the People's Republic of China.

**Cultural Revolution:** period in Communist China under Mao Zedong when religious traditions and practitioners were persecuted

### *Mao in the Rearview Mirror*

The Forbidden City in Beijing is the immense, walled complex from which the Yuan, Ming, and Qing emperors ruled all of China. It was at the top of the palace's southern gateway, called the Gate of Heavenly Peace (*Tian'anmen*), that Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Despite all the changes that have swept China since Mao's death in 1976, his immense painted portrait still hangs over that gateway. The image serves as a constant reminder of Mao's heroic and determined role in leading the Communist Party's triumphant success.

The style of the Tian'anmen Square portrait suggests that Mao is the ascetic servant of the people, a true communist leader whose deeds are legendary. He bravely fought the Japanese, and in the Long March of 1934, he led the troops in strategic retreat halfway across China. For Mao, and so for the early Chinese Communist Party leaders as well, religion and religious institutions were "enemies of the people." Mao was a rationalist who critiqued "superstitious" religious ideas that allegedly blocked the people's attempts to understand the world; he never ceased to highlight the classic modernist goal of setting the world free from the wrong thinking that stemmed from belief in supernatural "magic."

People who grew up during the decades of Mao's dictatorship later, and painfully, realized how full of "superstition" they had been in uncritically following the Communist Party, especially in showing reverence for Chairman Mao. Even the Party has acknowledged his mistakes, several of which caused the loss of millions of lives. Yet

Contemporary Mao amulet, inscribed with prayers for good fortune and safe travel, of the kind found widely in China today adorning rearview mirrors in cars.

today, more than forty years after his death, Mao retains his standing among many Chinese as a sincere and uncorrupted champion of China's renewal who tried to seek justice and the common good. But regard for Mao endures in ways that even he did not anticipate. For example, many Chinese now regard Mao as a deity. In their homes, or even on their persons, you may find an amulet of Mao that is believed to confer protection and even business success to the bearer. The transformations underway in China today, and the restoration of religion among the Chinese people, are embedded in this striking turn of fate: The most powerful man in East Asia, while alive an atheist who suppressed religion, is in death a powerful spirit.

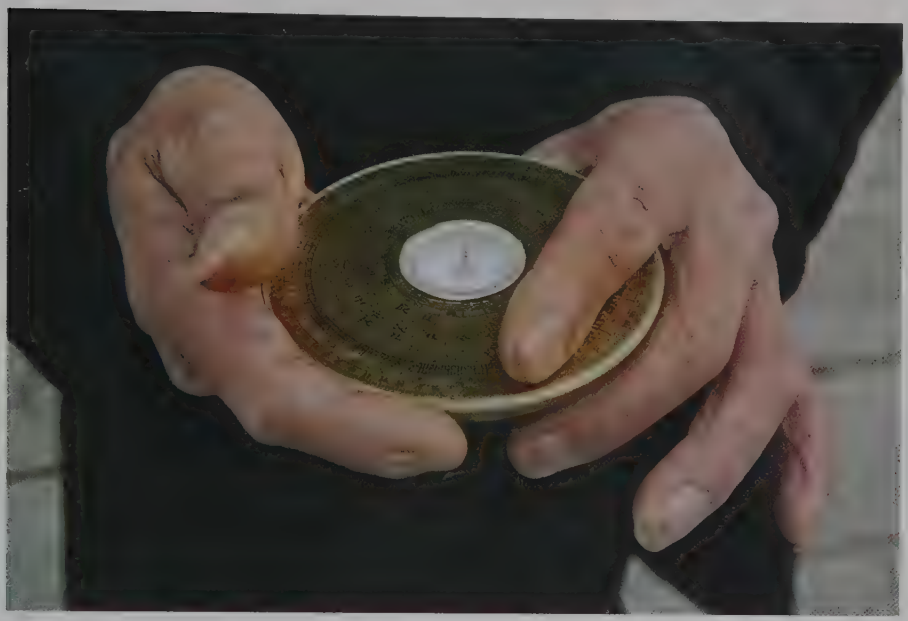
While his transformation to a revered protective spirit and god of wealth would doubtless have dismayed Chairman Mao, it does demonstrate the global pattern of religious traditions responding to the needs of local life. As the state and Party have, since the early 1990s, moved away from collectivist policies to emphasize individual and private enterprise, leaders have exhorted the Chinese people that "to get rich is glorious." At the same time, the government has retreated from promises of guaranteed state employment, pensions, and universal medical care. So is it really surprising that an unassailable icon would be adopted as the god of personal protection and wealth?

### *The Force of Feng Shui*

Ideas about what constitutes "religion" in China not only fascinate modern scholars but have been repeatedly debated by officials of the Communist Party. In the reform era, as pressure has been exerted to reintroduce almost every sort of former spiritual practice, the East Asian organized religions, with their potential for reestablishing nationwide institutional networks, have had to deal with deliberate governmental attempts to control and regulate them. A few ancient practices, however, were left almost entirely unmolested. One of these is feng shui, the school of applied religious Daoism that seeks to maximize human flourishing in natural and constructed environments. (The name *feng shui*, which means literally "wind-water," refers to the principal bearers of environmental energy used in geomancy.)

Feng shui consultants are today found everywhere across mainland China, where they advise builders of the new hotels, residences, and factories rising so quickly across the country. The goal of feng shui is to determine the most auspicious building sites, architectural designs, and living arrangements. Both private concerns and state ventures with Party approval now take the "science" of mapping the qi, the inherent energy of a place, quite seriously.

The state's support of feng shui has given credence to the classical religious worldview regarding humanity and the environment. Feng shui is based on Daoist principles of balancing yin and yang, channeling the subterranean and atmospheric flow of their qi, and pursuing health and prosperity through expert arrangement of harmonious design features. The government's policy reflects the perennial Chinese emphasis on religion's practical, worldly benefits.



A feng shui master holds a compass, or *lopan*, used to determine auspicious environments.

Nor is mainland China the only area to see the effect of this revival of the ancient worldview. As significant numbers of Chinese people have migrated overseas, real estate brokers from London to San Francisco take account of feng shui analysis in marketing their properties.

### *Nationalism and Confucianism Revived*

Perhaps even more striking is the return of Confucius to an honored position in modern China. In the retreat from communist ideology and its vision of an egalitarian social revolution, China has been beset by corruption as the state hastily instituted market reforms. Many Chinese writers have pointed out the crisis in faith and values as the profit-seeking motive has been unleashed over the last four decades. Since 2011, a rising theme in the China press has been the decline of moral values and the lack of civic virtues, highlighted by noted cases of officials embezzling vast sums of money and of strangers refusing to help injured children or elders.

In apparent recognition of this potential source of chaos and being a cause for its demise, the Communist Party reversed itself and embraced Confucianism. The restoration of Confucius to respectability is part of its promotion of a more primordial Chinese tradition on which to anchor its permanent power base: nationalism. Regardless of whether they support the communist government, Chinese people widely share great pride in their civilization and its culture. Party strategists carefully manage how companies engage with the world economy, and adapt rapidly to changes in global supply chains and markets. Most Chinese view the future with optimism, as they

expect its economy to become the world's largest and China to re-establish its position as a leading world power.

The People's Republic of China has permitted a return to Confucianism in order to evoke nationalistic pride, another complete reversal by the Communist Party leadership. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao required Red Guards (a fanatical pro-Mao student movement) to denounce Confucius, tarring the master as an apologist for feudalism and exploitation, a symbol for all the traditions that the Communist Party was out to replace. The Party also attacked the core Confucian virtue of filial piety, requiring the individual's highest loyalty for the Party itself.

**qi gong:** discipline of cultivating the vital individual life force

Yet the excesses of the Cultural Revolution also may have sparked renewed interest in Confucian thought in China. In 1994, to mark the 2,545th birthday of the great sage, the Party launched an initiative to revive Confucian thought. A series of international conferences were convened, the Confucian temple in Beijing was restored and reopened to the public, and Confucius' home temple in Qufu was celebrated as a place to visit. In 2010, China, for the first time under Party rule, celebrated Confucius' birthday. In 2013, the Party passed a national law requiring children to visit and support their elderly parents, not mentioning its efforts to undermine such filial piety during the Cultural Revolution. By the year 2016, China's presidents and high officials readily quoted from Confucius in public speeches, popular books and television series in China explored Confucius and Confucian thought, and the Communist Party funded the creation of Confucius Institutes across the world.

With the allowance for religious freedom after the Cultural Revolution, traditional Daoist priests have enjoyed their restoration to temple service across China.

## *Qi Gong*

Another area in which religion has returned to mainland China in the guise of applied medical therapy is in the practice of ***qi gong***. This healing art, like feng shui, draws on Daoist theories of vital energy in the body.

In some governmental circles, there is ambivalence about such applied spirituality. The modern official press features an occasional article, often by a prominent scientist, that denounces "phony qi gong" as "harmful" and

## RITUALS AND RITES: Ancestor Veneration

### Then: Traditional Funerals

In its zeal to end wasteful expenditures on the rituals of death and ancestor veneration, which for some traditional families meant going into nearly inescapable debt for extravagant funerals, the Chinese Communist Party in 1956 issued strict regulations limiting funeral observances and—in a radical break from the past—required secular cremation while also prohibiting rituals at ancestral graves. This attempt to break with the Confucian tradition went even further during the Cultural Revolution, when the Red Guards ransacked and destroyed gravesites throughout China, including parts of the great imperial tombs. Mao was trying to destroy the familial tradition, which he saw as dividing "the people" and therefore undermining the Party's quest to promote the collective good.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the practices of traditional funeral processions and burial of the dead in family graves slowly began to return, largely in villages and smaller towns, but hardly at all around major cities such as Beijing, where until 1996 the government posted signs threatening punishment for those burning paper money at gravesides. Since 2008, when the Chinese government reinstated Ching-Ming as a national holiday, ancient cemeteries have been restored and new ones created to accommodate families' wishes to reestablish the old family traditions. (According to government statistics, more than 520 million people—almost half of China's population—visited cemeteries during this festival in 2017.) Ideal sites near Beijing and Shanghai now command very high prices, and one sees burial places of elaborate design, including permanent brick structures with nameplates affixed. Even government-owned shops can be found selling the items used in this popular observance, as the traditional belief again affirms that the state of one's ancestors' graves determines one's own destiny.

### Now: Online Memorial Rituals

Across Asia, during the Ching-Ming Festival, virtual possibilities exist if individual mourners can't take time off, are allergic to incense smoke, or have a family grave that is too far away. Instead, one can simply go online. A growing number of temple websites in China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan feature online memorial halls, that are dedicated to ancestor worship. These websites offer convenience, with many featuring a special form users can fill in to send good wishes, messages, and even presents to the dead. Some find this a meaningful innovation, but others express the opposite view, that such virtual ancestor worship just cultivates laziness and insincerity.

criticizes individual practitioners with clichéd denunciations such as their "engaging in feudal and superstitious activities" which use "the flag of qi gong as a cover for swindling others," Yet the Party continues to allow the practice to flourish, even in state-controlled temple precincts. The ever-popular Chinese martial arts films feature masters who fight using their qi gong powers to deflect weapons and fly through the air. Thus, while this medically oriented practice is mixed with other therapies (Chinese and Western), qi gong, like feng shui, lives on to affirm the credibility of the most elemental ideas of classical Daoism.

### *Falun Gong and Eastern Lightning: The Limits of Religious Freedom*

In general, there were fewer new religions in the People's Republic of China under communist rule than in Korea or Japan. Yet barely a quarter century after Mao's death, the party leadership discovered that its relaxation of earlier repressive policies had allowed the formation of powerful new Chinese religions called Buddhist Law Power (*Falun Gong* or *Falun Dafa*) and Eastern Lightning (*Dongfang Shǎndiàn*).

Founded in 1990, Eastern Lightning emerged into public awareness near the end of 2012, when it widely publicized the prediction that the end of the world was about to begin. Led by a woman from central China, "Lightning Deng," the sect identifies her as "Jesus Christ incarnated"; her mission is to "slay the great red dragon," the Communist Party. Her most widely distributed book, *Lightning from the Orient*, proclaims itself "the Word of God." It claims the first coming of Christ was to redeem humanity, while hers as the second is "to conquer men's hearts and defeat Satan." Recruiting with aggressive means, Eastern Lightning leaders have attracted over a million followers. Anticipating these last days, many withdrew all their money from banks and sold their property. The Chinese government launched a campaign of arrests against members, declaring it a dangerous cult and "a social cancer and a plague on humankind."[6]

Founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi, Falun Gong quickly attracted millions across China. Falun Gong's principal practice of qi gong exercises promises to promote individual health and spiritual transformation through the generation of extraordinary

Sales clerk at an ancestor worship shop, Shanghai. Government shops across China now sell the paper money, candles, and incense needed for this ancient practice, once prohibited by official regulations. Recent additions available in upscale memorial supply shops include paper replicas of iPads, Android phones, and computers.

Women performing a qi gong ritual in Shanghai, with gestures designed to cultivate and concentrate the qi energy in the body.

energy, in line with Daoist traditions at least two millennia old. Falun Gong leaders began to attract government criticism, however, and its members were persecuted. In late April 1999, the group staged a protest against these actions, with 10,000 members surrounding the Communist Party leadership compound in central Beijing. Arriving undetected, Falun Gong followers sat in silent, nonviolent protest throughout the day and then dispersed without incident. The massive sit-in surprised and upset the leadership and soon provoked an all-out propaganda offensive, capped by the arrest of Falun Gong leaders, who were charged with antigovernment subversion. Within months, the group had been outlawed as a "pernicious superstition."

Falun Gong and Eastern Lightning resemble the new religions we have described in Korea and Japan: Their doctrines comprise an original recombination of Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian millennial doctrines, and their founders both claim supernormal status claiming them to be "on a level the same as Buddha and Jesus." Falun Gong's principal practice of qi gong exercises promises to promote individual health and spiritual transformation through the generation of extraordinary energy. Falun Gong in particular is an apt example of a new East Asian religion in the age of media technology that lives on in exile and online, like so many new religions becoming global sects.

### *Shrines in Chinese Village Squares, Shops, and Front Doors*

Across mainland China since 1976, devotees have worked to reestablish shrines, temples, and the ritual practices destroyed or prohibited under government orders dating back to 1949. Exactly where the Communist Party's line of toleration lies has varied according to the locality and its succession of regional officials. Tensions still exist over what is "superstition," which is strongly discouraged by the government,

versus what is considered "religion." Individuals have a constitutional right to practice a religion, but the state reserves the right to grant or withhold this designation for a given belief system.

Accounts of village life cite the near-universal attempt of rural peasants to use part of their new earnings to build (or rebuild) the public temples that house the local and regional gods. None is more telling than the practice of making offerings to the local earth gods (**Tu-di Gong**). In pre-Maoist China, earth god shrines were found in homes, neighborhoods, villages, government offices (where they received offerings from state officials), and even Buddhist monasteries. People believe that, if petitioned properly and sincerely, the earth gods will protect against locusts, mildew, disease, and other obstacles to a rich harvest as well as solve any other difficulties in their domain. These shrines and this cult have returned everywhere in China.

**Tu-di Gong:** "Earth Ruler"; local god who is worshipped across modern China to control the earth's fertility

Clearly, the Chinese government has accepted the return of China's diffuse religion—as long as the new organizations do not threaten the Communist Party's ruling power. By being sensitive to the importance and meaning of religion, we can comprehend how China's spiritual traditions are changing to meet the needs of the common people as they face life's challenges. As the Party has expanded economic opportunity but ended most social safety-net protection programs (e.g., guaranteed employment, medical insurance, and housing), people increasingly believe that to prosper they need all the luck, and divine assistance, they can attract. Accordingly, the quest to satisfy the perceived need for good fortune is so intense that the official proponents of communist doctrine are reluctant to suppress practices many old Communist Party members consider "an opiate of the masses."

Rituals performed at a Daoist temple in Xi'an.

## Japan's Creative Diversity: Old Traditions and New

Whereas in China the Cultural Revolution postponed the expression of religious awakening until after Mao's death in 1976, in Japan this era of innovation commenced in 1945, with the necessity of rebuilding the war-ravaged country both physically and spiritually. After the devastation of World War II, Japan had to reinvent a form of government, redesign its economic system, and rebuild its major cities without reference to the emperor as their divine leader. During the American occupation, Emperor Hirohito was compelled to renounce his divinity (as a Shinto kami) and to underscore his purely ceremonial presence in Japan's political future.

The state system of neo-Shintoism was discredited and discarded. Shinto then survived largely in its myriad shrines dedicated to divinities in neighborhoods, villages, and regions and attended to by hereditary priests. Establishment Buddhism, like the rest of Japan's cultural institutions, also had to overcome the stigma of having uncritically supported the fascist state. As the economic system flourished, Japan's wealth eventually was used to rebuild these institutions, accelerating the traditional religion's material recovery and, in some cases, expansion.

### *The Claim of "Having No Religion" and the Reality of New Year's Rituals*

Educated Japanese, and oftentimes their friends in intellectual Western circles, are fond of proclaiming that the Japanese are "lacking in religion," an Enlightenment attitude common among educated East Asians. While few Japanese today care to learn much in depth about Shinto mythology or Buddhist doctrine, widespread indifference does not prove that Japan "lacks religion." Beyond the unprecedented growth of the new religions, one has only to know where and when to seek a wealth of examples that dispel this widespread stereotype about a Japanese people somehow being different from all others.

Contemporary New Year's Day observances provide an example of the strength of "diffuse popular religion" in modern Japan. During the Meiji era, Japan had legislated a shift away from the Chinese lunar calendar's determining the date of the "new year" festival and adopted the Western (or Gregorian) system that has the year begin on January 1. On this day and the days around it, Japan shuts down its economy. Families begin the process of renewal through a special cleaning of the house. On New Year's Eve or early New Year's morning, long lines of family members arrive at their local Shinto shrine to pay their respects to their neighborhood's kami. People then consign to bonfires all the family amulets accumulated over the past year; soon afterward, a family member will purchase new amulets to arrange on the newly purified family altar. Dozens of amulet varieties exist, some dating back centuries.

In a recent survey of those who visited Shinto shrines, 65 percent of men and 75 percent of women reported experiencing *aratamatta kimochi*, "a feeling of inner peace," afterward.[7] Many ritual activities at these shrines seem to indicate religious conviction—clapping the hands together, bowing before an image, making an

offering, buying an amulet. Thus, contemporary New Year's Day traditions in Japan as well as everyday activities at Shinto shrines fit perfectly into the "religion" framework we introduced in Chapter 1.

A powerful and poignant indication of enduring religiosity of the Japanese was seen in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima earthquake and the tsunami and nuclear disaster it caused, a catastrophe that claimed several thousand lives. Prominent monks in the months following pointed out that the community's response is indicative of the Buddhist tradition's enduring place in Japanese life: showing patience, resilience, and self-sacrifice in the face of tragedy. The absence of looting, the many acts of self-sacrifice, and workers facing dangerous radiation for the common good epitomized Confucian morality and the Buddhist bodhisattva ideal. To memorialize the dead, priests read scripture and chanted sutras before bodies were cremated. And for bodies washed out to sea, there were prominent and nationally televised mass memorials.

Then, as people began rebuilding their homes and lives until the present, Shinto moved to center stage. People turned to Shinto rituals performed by priests to restore the balance between the human and the divine, bless the construction sites, and pacify the local kami. At the Otsuchi shrine that stood undamaged in a small town devastated by the waves, throngs of survivors stopped by daily in the first months to bow and ring the bell at the main shrine. As one CNN report noted, "Their prayers to this local kami in the first months were heartbreaking, as residents asked for help in finding missing relatives before continuing the grim task of searching for their bodies. Others asked for strength in the face of the horrific post-tsunami reality."[8]

Buddhist temple damaged by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Yamamoto, Japan.

### *The Zen of Daruma-san*

**Daruma-san:** Japanese name of legendary Indian sage who brought Zen tradition to East Asia; a folk icon in Japan

If any single religious icon could be said to embody the paradoxes of religion in Japan today, it might be **Daruma-san**. The name and identity of this figure derive from Bodhidharma, the sage renowned as the transmitter of the Buddhist meditation tradition from India (around 600 CE) that became Ch'an in China and Zen in Japan. Daruma-san became a Zen saint, and legends about him are part of the scriptural lore of this school. They celebrate his unbending commitment to meditation retreats and his terse replies to students and patrons. Images of Daruma-san came to be popular in Japan. His visage adorns kites, toys, knockdown dolls, and sake cups. Several dozen major Buddhist temples feature his icon and offer a full range of amulets.

Today, the most widely used images of Daruma-san are limbless round papier-mâché icons that are employed for making vows or proclaiming formal wishes. The standard ritual consists of making a wish and coloring in one eye of the statue, which is then placed on the family altar. When there is success in the matter wished for, the other eye is colored in and the doll (like all other amulets) is eventually discarded, fueling the next New Year's temple bonfire. The Daruma-san icon is used in the same manner by businesspeople undertaking new ventures and politicians beginning election campaigns.

Thus, with Daruma-san, we witness the domestication into popular Japanese ritual life of the founding saint of Zen Buddhism, a fiercely ascetic meditation master who has become transmuted into an ostensibly comic figure, who nonetheless commands a following of millions.

### *The Newer "New Religions" in Japan*

Although a new generation of Japanese religious leaders has formed independent groups to meet spiritual needs, the attraction of new religions must be kept in perspective; most Japanese today have not joined them. The majority find the older traditions or being nonreligious more to their liking.

Daruma images, round Japanese dolls modelled after Bodhidharma.

Shinto shrines remain reference points for many modern Japanese today. These rocks conjoined by sacred hemp rope are located near Ise, symbolizing the union of the first kami.

Some of the new new religions were synthesized by charismatic founders from Japan's long-extant traditions along with aspects of modern nationalism, elements of Christianity, or scientific principles. Many of the new religions began in some measure as responses to the dislocations that shook Japanese society during its sudden opening to the outside world in the late nineteenth century and the headlong modernization and Westernization of the Meiji era. Almost every older new religion splintered with the passing of its founder and the struggles of interpretation and succession that followed, adding to the number of groups. But most of the popular new new religions today are more recent in origin, attracting followers who find themselves disconnected from the old pattern of melding Shintoism and Buddhism that satisfied their ancestors.

As of 2016, over 18,600 new religion organizations are officially registered with the Japanese government. The great majority are small in size and rarely active. Many are hard to distinguish from poetry circles, philosophy clubs, or groups formed around health practitioners. The major new religions, however, are an important part of today's spiritual landscape; roughly 20 percent of Japanese people surveyed in recent years reported that their predominant religious affiliation is with one of the new religions.[9]

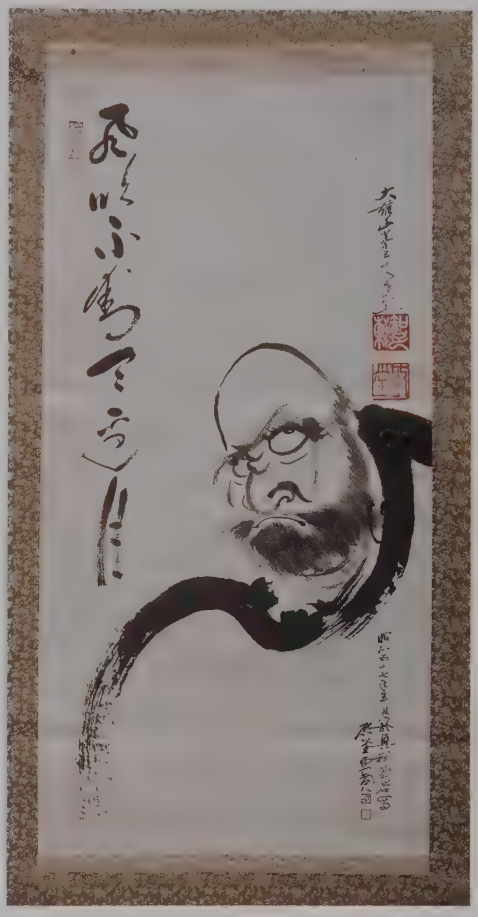
Most have formed around a charismatic leader whose personal struggle to find the truth becomes paradigmatic for disciples drawn to the movement. Some sort of shamanic experience or performance is the most common ritual. Although members of most are taught to reject the diffuse eclecticism of Shintoism or Buddhism, many of the new religion worldviews still draw on doctrines such as Buddhist karma and

reincarnation, Confucian moral teachings and ancestor rites, or Shinto styles of worship. Some also import practices from the West or from India. Each new religion also tends to be worldly in its goals, and many are imbued with the mission of ushering in a new divine era.

The most successful sects have also built a new "sacred center," a shrine that expresses the sect's mission and a priestly bureaucratic administration that manages the organization. Membership in most new religions is open, but there is typically an initiation that requires individuals to make a personal commitment to the group.

The most successful new religions have also built schools, colleges, and hospitals; some offer residential communities and athletic facilities to sustain their members from cradle to grave. These resources are also useful for proselytizing purposes and for demonstrating the power of the new path itself. The Tenrikyo, for example, one of the most successful new religions, has centers in every urban area of Japan; its headquarters, called Tenri City (near Nara), is a center for pilgrimage comparable to Salt Lake City for Mormons.

Sociological surveys have determined that most devotees of the new religions are those excluded from dominant avenues to prestige in modern Japan. That is, with certain exceptions, members do not typically have prestigious jobs in the large corporations but run small, family businesses. Within the group, there are hierarchies and internal ranks to which individuals can aspire. Significantly, women typically outnumber men in membership and serve as leaders; their proselytizing is notable for its distinctly maternal style.



Zen painting depicting Bodhidharma, founder of the Ch'an/Zen Buddhist school.

The new religions all promise help solving central human problems. Whatever their supernatural beliefs, all hold that sickness, economic failure, and interpersonal relations can be fully under individual control. Life will improve, they assert, if devotees will only discipline themselves in realizing the core values the group emphasizes in Japanese culture: harmony, loyalty, filial piety, selflessness, diligence, and ritual service. Problems can be solved by making a concerted effort to perfect the self and to harmonize it with all levels of life. The sects differ in the prescriptions for accomplishing these goals, and we can give here only a few representative examples of the "new 'new religions,'" groups formed in the postmodern era.

**Rissho Koseikai** Rissho Koseikai was founded in 1938 by Reiyukai Kyodan member Niwano Nikkyo (1906–1999), who retained the Nichiren Buddhist school's focus on the *Lotus Sutra*. After 1969, the group's focus shifted to the individual's personality development through special counseling sessions led by trained

lay "teachers" and the goal of world peace. Members sit together in a circle, creating an intimate atmosphere for open discussion. Rissho Koseikai teachers are trained to bring the Mahayana teachings, particularly those highlighting the universal Buddha-nature within all beings, to bear on all problems. The member's vow, which is repeated daily, shows its Buddhist center and its commitment to bring the teachings to life in the modern world.

As of 2018, the Rissho Koseikai was Japan's second-largest new religion, organized uniquely according to government unit lines and claiming over 2 million member households. It has 245 centers in twenty countries, the great majority in Japan. Missionary movements have brought Rissho Koseikai to Korea, Brazil, and the United States.

We, members of Rissho Koseikai,
Take refuge in the Eternal Buddha Shakyamuni,
And recognize in Buddhism the true way of salvation,
Under the guidance of our revered founder, Nikkyo Niwano.
In the spirit of lay Buddhists,
We vow to perfect ourselves
Through personal discipline and leading others
And by improving our knowledge and practice of the faith,
And we pledge ourselves to follow the bodhisattva way
To bring peace to our families, communities, and countries and to the world.

—Rissho Koseikai vow

SOURCE: http://www.rk-world.org/ (November 10, 2007).

**Perfect Liberty Kyodan** Another among the most popular groups is the Perfect Liberty Kyodan (P. L. Kyodan, or PL), whose primary slogan, "Religion is art," indicates its emphasis on the spiritual value of practicing the fine arts in everyday life. Founded in 1924, its focal practice is liturgical: prayers choreographed with stylized prostrations, gestures, and offerings. The theology is monotheistic, but with a strong emphasis on the human mind's central role in discerning divine warnings and receiving divine instruction through the sect's training. PL claims 500 churches in ten different countries, with more than 1.25 million members; its official aim is, according to its website, "to make true world peace a reality by inspiring people to understand and appreciate their power to create and plan, judge and decide, and make the world a true utopia."[10]

**Agonshu** A new religion founded in 1971, Agonshu also has a Buddhist identity. The group was formed by Seiyu Kiriyama (1921–2016), a charismatic spiritualist who claimed that the true teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha were revealed to him. Kiriyama's distilled "essence of Buddhism" is that the ancestors must be properly "turned into realized Buddhas" through performing special rituals for them in the afterlife, a belief that would be disputed by traditional Buddhist monks and scholars. Agonshu teachings attribute the world's troubles to the influence of the dead, who afflict the living to protest neglect. In the group's view, Kiriyama has rescued for the good of the entire world esoteric practices to pacify and enlighten the dead, particularly through fire rituals kept secret for centuries by the tantric Buddhist school in Japan called *Shingon*. The greatest yearly practice of this Agonshu rite, called *hoshi matsuri*, or "star festival," has become one of the most spectacular events in Japanese religion today. Televised nationally, it attracts a half-million pilgrims annually to witness the ritual: Agonshu priests set two massive ritual fires, one to benefit the ancestors and the other to promote the personal welfare of all participants, who contribute millions of small boards to fuel the flaming blazes.

Let's do it!
I will certainly succeed!
I am blessed with very good luck!
I will certainly do well!
I will definitely win!

—Agonshu chant

SOURCE: Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), p. 100.

**Sukyo Mahikari** Sukyo Mahikari, founded in 1963, is an ethnocentric new religion that presents a narrow, sectarian view of salvation. It teaches that the postwar

occupation unnaturally imposed democracy and materialism on the Japanese people, causing them to be possessed by evil spirits angry over the corruption of the country. Then, communism was sent by the gods to warn humanity of a coming ordeal, or "baptism by fire," that will claim all but the elect, who must restore patriotic ties to the emperor and demonstrate their commitment to the key Confucian relationships between parents and children and between husbands and wives. Those who follow this vision will be the "seed people" to restart the world in its proper order. Since the founder's death and the succession of his daughter as leader, the group has emphasized an ordination ritual that conveys "the transmission of light energy that purifies the spiritual aspect of people"[11] and environmental activism, including community cleanup campaigns. Sukyo Mahikari claims close to a million adherents and has established branches in 75 countries.

## Korea's Strong Confucian Tradition Accommodates Diversity

With the tradition of Confucianism entrenched in family rituals, marriage arrangements, and the moral education programs of the public school curriculum, South Korea today is the most Confucian nation in East Asia. Institutions dedicated to Confucian studies thrive in Korea, and exponents use the school system and mass media to spread Confucian values.

Some among the early twentieth-century Korean political elite (like many others in East Asia) believed Confucianism to be harmful to the nation, hindering its progress in the modern world. From this viewpoint, Westernization, agnosticism, and/or Christianity were seen as an antidote. However, Confucianism as the cultural center of South Korea has endured even among Christian converts, most of whom openly observe their family's older rituals in honor of ancestors. South Korea has also adopted national economic goals in a Confucian framework: The central government takes responsibility for the citizenry's education and economic well-being, supports the family as the basis for social stability, accepts the intelligentsia as the conscience of the nation, and invests in education as the essential foundation for both material and cultural progress. The government has likewise supported major institutions dedicated to Confucian studies.

In North Korea, an emphasis on Confucian civil religion with communist characteristics has endured. Much as in the Maoist era, citizens are expected to sacrifice themselves for the common good, and to participate in the "cult of personality" centered on the modern nation's ruling patriarch, Kim Jong Un. In recent years, both modest Christian and Buddhist groups have been permitted.

### *Confucian Revival: The T'oegyehak Movement*

Since learning the lessons of history is a strong Confucian value, it is not surprising that an important South Korean group emphasizes a prominent figure in its own historical tradition, the philosopher Yi T'oegye (1501–1570). Master T'oegye developed

the ideas of the most famous neo-Confucian Chinese thinker, Zhu Xi, whose Second Epoch leadership we have already discussed. Yi T'oegye was responsible for making his system of thought prominent in Korea.

**T'oegyehak:** modern Korean Confucian group based on teachings of master Yi T'oegye

The Korean industrial leader Lee Dong-choon (1919–89) started the traditionalist **T'oegyehak** movement by publishing the prolific writings of Master T'oegye. The T'oegyehak, which is a presence not only across East Asia but among East Asians living in the West, promotes detailed studies of the Confucian values as interpreted by Chinese and Korean masters. The organization has sponsored numerous conferences and made copies of the Confucian classics available across the globe.

### *Buddhist Revival*

Despite many setbacks over the last century, the surviving Korean Buddhist institutions have established an important niche in Korean society through the monastery schools and lay institutions they founded. The Son Buddhist school, the Korean version of Zen, has sent several prominent teachers to the West, winning international support and renown.

**Won Buddhism:** Korean school of Buddhism that combines Zen and Pure Land teachings

A new school calling itself *Won-bul-gyo*, styled **Won Buddhism** in English, arose in 1924. Its founder, Soe-Tae San (1891–1943), claimed to have been enlightened through his own independent ascetic practices. He and his disciples sought to revive Buddhism by simplifying its doctrines and combining Pure Land and Zen teachings. The only Won ritual involves the worship of a picture of a black circle in a white background, symbolizing the *dharmakaya*, the truth body of the Buddha.

Only after the death of San and the end of Japanese occupation in 1945 did the group find popular acceptance across Korea. Typical of reformist "Protestant Buddhist" groups elsewhere in Asia (see Chapter 7), Won Buddhism has been especially popular in major urban areas, and it emphasizes how Buddhist doctrines are compatible with modern scientific thought. It also makes Buddhism attractive to the laity by translating classical texts into vernacular Korean and through holding weekly congregational worship sessions involving chanting, simple rituals, and sermons. The group encourages women to be leaders and active participants as well. Won Buddhist monks or nuns, who lead the ritual services, can marry.

Another aspect of Won Buddhism that resembles reform Buddhism as practiced outside Korea is the encouragement of lay meditation and social service. For the former, members try to cultivate awareness of the "Buddha-nature in all things" and bring this awareness to all work done in everyday life. The primary form of social service undertaken by Won Buddhists has been in building schools, from kindergartens to universities. For Won social engagement, the Buddhist ideal of no-self (*anatman*) is emphasized through service projects, which are also seen in classical terms as a means to address the universality of suffering. This is summarized by the founder's often cited exhortation:

> The Truth is one.
> The World is one.

Human beings are one family.
The World is one work place.
Let us cultivate One World Community.

As of 2019, this school's temples can be found on every continent, and the group claims 960,000 followers. Won Buddhists have pursued ecumenical relations with other faiths, both in Korea and with Japanese Buddhist groups.

### *Christianity in Korea*

What makes Korea a unique stronghold of Christianity in Asia? Similarities between emotional Protestant rituals and the shaman tradition have been suggested along with unique factors in the recent Korean historical experience, such as the Buddhist cooperation with Japan's imperial rulers, churches' prominent involvement in the struggle against Japanese occupation (1910–1945), and Korean Christians' subsequent leadership in human rights activism. With the exception of some churches tolerating shamanism and reinterpreting ancestor ritualism within a Christian framework, there has been little doctrinal innovation outside the traditional denominational frameworks. As of 2016, approximately 32 percent of the South Korean population was Christian, with Protestants outnumbering Catholics by 4-to-1. There are now dozens of "megachurches" in Korea, with the Yoido Full Gospel Church in central Seoul the largest Christian congregation in the world at over 830,000 members!

## Shamans in Modern Asia: A Division of Labor with the World Religions

Shamanism continues to be an integral part of the pluralistic religious cultures of Asia. In most settlements across this vast region, there is probably a local medium who can enter into the trance state to heal or to solve practical problems. Such shamanic practice today has been harmonized with the doctrines of the dominant religions and is tolerated by the Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic religious establishments that are also by now deeply rooted in these areas.

This pattern of coexistence includes East Asia, where shamans augment popular Confucian beliefs and ancestral rituals, a tradition of pluralistic accommodation there going back to the beginnings of recorded history. Given the widespread belief across East Asia in deities inhabiting this earth and in the soul's afterlife destiny, it is not surprising that East Asians still recognize the utility of spirit mediums who attempt to communicate with the dead. In addition, the shamanic skill of divination provides answers to such problems as where grandmother's soul might be residing, whether the ghost of a dead child is causing family troubles, or what might be done to gain the favor of a local god who could help end a drought. Unhappy spirits are also thought to cause distress to the living, so here, too, shamans have had an important role in healing the sick.

"Look around. . . . So much of nature has been ruined. Spirits of trees and rocks are displaced and haunt humans because they have nowhere else to go. No wonder the country is a mess."

—Kim Myung, a Korean shaman

SOURCE: Choe Sang-Hun, "Shamanism Enjoys Revival in Techno-Savvy South Korea" *New York Times*, July 7, 2007.

A typical example could be a client approaching a spirit medium because of the suspicion that a child's sudden illness is due to ghost possession. The medium will beat his or her drum and go into trance in the sick one's presence and speak with one or more spirits after having made contact. The medium's communications are usually interpreted by an assistant, who acts as the intermediary for the family and community members present. For example, contemporary mediums in Taiwan, called *dangki*, become possessed and rapidly write divinely inspired characters in red ink on yellow papers. Sometimes these writings become amulets for their patients. Alternatively, they may be burned, whereupon their ashes are mixed with water and then drunk as medicine. The role of these spirit mediums has, if anything, *increased* with the modernization and rising prosperity of Taiwan. The same phenomenon has been reported in modern Korea as well.

**mudang:** Korean shaman

Amid a rising number of Christian converts and modest revivals under way among the various Buddhist schools, one finds a steady reliance on shamans, or ***mudang***, in South Korea. Shamans in Korea enjoy uniquely high status and popularity. Once demonized by Christian missionaries and denounced as charlatans by the early post–World War II South Korean governments, in 2016 shamans were praised as bearers of "intangible cultural assets" and now have a following. Roughly 200,000 active, registered shamans exist in South Korea, and many now have connections to establishments such as "*saju* cafes," where clients can consult as they sip coffee; hundreds of commercial websites also give new lines of access to specific healers. Scholars speculate that it is shamanic traditions that have helped foster Korea's harmonious and richly pluralistic religious culture.

## GENDER FOCUS: Women Healers and Shamans Today

In most hunter-gatherer societies, both women and men worked as healers. As indigenous societies became more complex, settled, and adopted forms of pastoralism and simple agriculture, women were subject to greater restrictions, but in some societies, they still serve as healers and noted spirit mediums. In most urban communities of China and Japan, shamans are typically regarded as marginal figures of low status, but in South Korea, their practices are uniquely honored and sought by people of all faiths. Korean shamans tend to be predominantly drawn into the role from one of two backgrounds: troubling personal experiences that led them to initiation, or inheritance of the role through kinship lines.

Their séances, called *kut*, are usually held to contact a deity to request economic blessings, healing, restoration of good marital relations, or help in becoming pregnant. The shaman enters a trance and then begins to speak with voices attributed to deities. Typically, the first statements are complaints of deficiencies in the offerings laid out or about impurity, which Korean supernaturals particularly dislike. When sponsors apologize and promise to do better next time, the divinities usually entertain the sponsor's request(s). A second type of ritual has the most proficient shamans go to the next world with the soul of someone who has recently died or to check the status of a newly departed soul.

## TALES OF SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: Buddhist Satori

The greatest experience in Buddhism is the realization of ultimate truth of a reality "beyond words." Zen masters preserved stories of the conditions existing at the pivotal moments when disciples broke through to deeper, transformative realization. Like this one, for example.

Late one night a female Zen adept was carrying water in an old wooden bucket when she happened to glance across the surface of the water and saw the reflection of the moon. As she walked the bucket began to come apart and the bottom of the pail broke through, with the water suddenly disappearing into the soil beneath her feet and the moon's reflection disappearing along with it. In that instant the young woman realized that the moon she had been looking at was just a reflection of the real thing . . . just as her whole life had been. She turned to look at the moon in all its silent glory, her mind was ripe, and that was it . . . *satori* ("Enlightenment").

Source: Zen Master Chiyono, *No Moon, No Water.*

Shamans have thrived in modern Korea through dramatic rituals such as this one, in which the mudang subdues a troublesome local spirit.

## Conclusion: Have We Entered a Third Confucian Age?

Our study of the religions of East Asia shows that, contrary to the assertions of many among the modern elites of China and Japan as well as numerous Western scholars, religious beliefs and practices have remained central to the life and culture of the region. Moreover, only by understanding the religious dimensions of Shintoism and

The vibrant religious and philosophical ferment felt by many Chinese is clearly visible in the new art being produced by artists such as Zhang Huan. As the artists describes this installation, called *Peace Bell II* (2001), "The act of ringing the bell—slamming the figure of the artist into the record of his ancestry to produce a beautiful and powerful sound—suggests that artistic struggle with the circumstances of and inheritance from family is both necessarily violent and richly generative."

Confucianism can one comprehend the nationalism and cultural foundations of the region's post–World War II rise to create the world's leading economies. Likewise, only by recognizing the religious dimensions of Maoist communism is it possible to fathom how in China the Communist Party has sustained its place of power since 1949, a topic we'll return to in Chapter 9.

Nevertheless, Confucianism and Daoism present a challenge to the Western monotheistic model of "being religious," with some scholars claiming that these belief systems are not "religions" at all. Rather, their diverse aspects, as we illustrated, suggest another way for humans to be religious: not centering the sacred on a single God above but seeing as sacred this world "below," in which humans live together and within nature. Respect and reverence are the central religious emotions. Confucianism and the diffuse religions of East Asia have both cultural and supernatural dimensions. They create in each society a widely held world view of humans seeing themselves in concentric circles of reciprocal relatedness, making social relations sacred, harmonizing human existence with vital energies of nature, and respecting the creative power of the universe. In the supernatural dimension, they envision a world affected by deities, and reverence the survival of ancestors as spirits with whom relations can endure forever.

The general ethos promoted by all East Asian religions can be characterized as optimistic toward human life and human potential, seeing improvement of the individual and of society as sacred goals. Respect for the past serves to uphold acceptance of pluralism and the tolerance of religious diversity. The diffuse religion supports family cohesion as the center of a moral society, and the Confucian core of East Asia supports education for its role in cultivating character and in the acquisition of practical knowledge. This sort of "pragmatic idealism" calls for improving the world for the sake of worldly concerns, not as the dictate of a transcendent deity. The success in the modern global marketplace of this complex of religion and culture rebuts those Western scholars who had argued that East Asian religions were obstacles to modern economic development. New, syncretistic religious understandings, informed by growing global connections, seem destined to develop further in China.

If the Confucian system of family/ancestral devotion is regarded as the central pillar of Chinese tradition, then clearly it, too, has emerged renewed after the criticisms and persecutions. However, in recent years, there have been signs that the "Confucian family revival" in China was not as vibrant as originally thought. The market economy made extended family living difficult, so the elderly were left behind as jobs required moves; the Party's "one-child policy" placed the burden for elder care on one individual adult child; and the Party's suppression of children's literature promoting filial piety deprived today's adults of that teaching

during their childhood. These effects of earlier government policies became clear as press reports from 2012 onward exposed adults who had been scandalously unfilial: parents forced to live in unheated rooms, eat only gruel, or survive on their own in rural poverty, ignored by their own children. Shocked and dismayed, the Communist Party passed a law in 2013 requiring children to call parents regularly and act on their filial piety. Can a law change the pressures of the market economy to restore Confucian virtue?

Schools promoting the classical Confucian humanities are being reinvented in China in the twenty-first century.

It is possible that the future revival of religion in China will threaten regional stability. A large state trying to hold together diverse groups and disparate regions faces certain inherent problems, and difficulties loom large in the present relationship between communist China and its principal minorities. In particular, it is across religious issues that major fault lines affecting modern China are to be found, in particular with Muslims in Xinjiang Province and with Buddhists in the Tibetan cultural region.

Ascribing East Asia's economic revival mainly to its Confucian roots remains, for some, a contested position. According to "Third Epoch" proponents, the traumas of the modern era in effect liberated the Confucian worldview from the trappings of power that had developed in the imperial systems of China, Korea, and Japan. Under them, the application of the highest Confucian ideals had been corrupted by government officials and the organized religious academies, which turned "mastery" of the classics into a mere exercises of rote memorization needed to pass imperial examinations.

Now, a Confucian revival movement seeks to return to the basic teachings of the early sages (Confucius and Mencius, of the First Epoch) and do what Master Zhu Xi and other reformers accomplished in their time (the Second Epoch of neo-Confucianism). Believers in "Third Epoch" Confucianism, working on the periphery of China and increasingly finding supporters in mainland China as well, are today addressing the challenges of economic and cultural globalization.

Such efforts to revive this spiritual tradition have made "Third Epoch" Confucians critical of the global modernizing process, especially insofar as it has caused the fragmentation of society, promoted the vulgarization of social life, disregarded the public good, or overglorified wealth. The vast majority of modernist Confucians adopt this critical stance while also being committed to empirical science, democratic politics, gender equality, and economic development in their own countries. In early twenty-first-century China, interest in promoting Confucianism as a means of

In 2010, the Chinese government placed an image of Confucius in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, forty-one years after the sage was reviled by Communist Party Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Early in 2011, it was removed without comment, an indication of the persistent ambivalence in the Chinese Communist Party leadership.

forming the character of citizens is winning widespread support among intellectuals and parents, and even within the Communist Party itself. A host of newly approved schools include in their curriculum the study of traditional Confucianism. "Harmonious Society," a slogan for the nation's future that has been adopted by Xi Jinping, the Communist Party president, has Confucian overtones. The theme of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, "One world, one dream," also projected the early Confucian ideal of a world led by ethical ideals.

In the last few years, the authoritarian Confucianism of ancient Master Xun has been revived by the Communist Party in its persecuting religious groups who in their view threaten the unity of the country. Using advanced internet surveillance and detention in both prisons and large concentration camps, the Chinese government has directed reeducation campaigns against Muslims, Protestant Christians, and Tibetan Buddhists. It has likewise sought to arouse patriotism by fostering a personality cult focusing on the virtues of President Xi Jinping.

The global vision of "Third Epoch" exponents is to bring the Confucian tradition into the debate about how the twenty-first century's global order should be conceived. They aim to foster dialogue between the Confucian worldview and the ideologies of sociopolitical modernization and consumerism prominent in the Euro-American world. Informed by very different notions of religious truth and by ethnocentric visions of their own central places in the cosmos, will the world's people outside East Asia be interested in such a dialogue?

The Council for Secular Humanism declared recently: "Secular humanism emerges, then, as a comprehensive nonreligious life stance that incorporates a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist result-based ethical system."[1]

Given these utterly irreconcilable worldviews today, a pivotal question for the global future of religions is this: Can there be a shared ethic to face the challenges represented by existential global emergencies such as pandemics and climate change?

## Adaptive Traditionalism in the World Religions

While it is significant to note and account for the rise of new religions and new modes of religiosity in the modern period, it is also important to keep them in perspective. The majority of people across the world still carry on in the tradition they inherited from their parents, and the mainstream representatives of the world's religions continue the practice of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and so on. Within their domains, several trends are important to understand as part of their development: the effects of immigration, the integration of the internet, and the evolution of traditions in their spread far beyond their places of origin.

### *Immigration and Remittance Patronage*

The global diaspora of peoples has created new patterns of religious diffusion and new modes of religious affiliation and activity. Immigrant groups tend to settle and affiliate with those from the home country; as numbers increase and leaders emerge, these communities build sanctuaries (mosques, temples, centers) where they can worship authentically together. Over time, with increasing numbers and wealth, they typically arrange for the services of a visiting brahmin priest, imam, or Buddhist master who can perform special rituals and provide spiritual guidance for their members. There are now religious institutions representing all the major world religions in the United States that have most of the qualities of those back in the homeland: priests, monks, and imams whom the community supports as full-time residents, as well as programs for those seeking advanced spiritual practices (e.g., meditation, yoga, and Quran recitation). Many have united to build surpassingly beautiful sanctuaries and vibrant agendas of religious and related cultural events.

There is also an important reverse movement of wealth from immigrants back to their poorer homelands. Typically, those who move to the developed world, gain regular employment, and find success send regular financial remittances back to support their kin. It is common for some of this transferred wealth to be devoted to the religious teachers and institutions back "home." This long-distance patronage, both indirect and direct, has been made very convenient through internet transactions, and tapping the wealth of adherents working abroad has been a significant new factor in sustaining the vitality of religion across the developing world today. This has also met the needs of believers who want to perform acts of charity and make good karma.

This trend illustrates the adaptations that institutions from all the world religions are making to secure new funds and innovations. Many "new religions" with origins in Eurasia have been quite aggressive in seeking such patrons as well.

### *New Internet Connectivities (Temples, Monasteries, Independents)*

It is astonishing when one first explores the spectrum of websites and practices that religious traditions have placed on the internet. By now, it is common for any religious institution with regular internet connectivity, anywhere in the world, to establish a cyberpresence on the Web. With the internet creating a new virtual environment in which institutions can engage with members, this avenue of contact and interaction is naturally important to both parties. The address of the sanctuary, contact information, times for daily prayers, and the schedule for rituals provide ready answers to routine queries. Congregants can also sign up for listservs that send out regular passages from the scriptures or messages providing reminders of religious events. This adaptation also includes thousands of shamans in Korea; these individual practitioners now have their own websites where one can schedule their services. Christians can easily get multiple translations of the Bible for their phones and have access to lectures, sermons, podcasts, and church services throughout the world via the internet. Inspiring preachers can now build a global audience without leaving their congregation, and megachurches can now exist solely online.

Many religious institutions, however, do even more. Online classes are being offered for canonical languages such as Arabic, Sanskrit, or Tibetan that can open up reading in the original sacred texts and commentaries. Chat groups linking members

A young Buddhist monk at a school in Burma using a personal computer.

to religious teachers can enable discussions at a distance and sustained considerations of important points of belief and practice. For example, the Zen Mountain Monastery in New York has a regular time when practitioners can email a "cybermonk" who awaits opportunities to provide guidance in meditation. One certain effect of Covid-19 epidemic and its social distancing will be the expansion of online instruction in religious key doctrines, both basic and advanced.

Some traditions have gone still further, adapting the connections made by the internet as a channel spiritual *presence*. There are now hundreds of Hindu temples in India and across the world that offer a live camera view that provides *darshan* ("sacred eye contact") of the holy icons. Many with a formal request (and credit card payment) will have a priest perform a ritual of your liking as you watch live.

The entrepreneurship characteristic of the internet has even led aspiring businessmen to create web companies providing religious services that completely bypass traditional religious institutions. For example, an affiliate of Amazon.com in Japan called *Minrevi* now allows bereaved families to call *Obo-san bin* ("Mr. Monk Delivery") to have a monk come to the home to conduct a Buddhist funeral at a set time. The service's basic plan includes the monk, transportation, and a donation for ¥35,000 (US$300). By contrast, a Buddhist temple might offer a comparable service for ¥100,000 (US$830). Additional chanting and rituals can also be ordered.

A similar unaffiliated internet start-up was begun by Saumya Vardhan, who returned to India from her career in London to start a company that does Hindu rituals online only. Shubhpuja.com employs Brahmin priests who in a New Delhi temple/studio will do any of 151 pujas for paying patrons. The webpage assures the devotee/customer that these rituals "will solve and heal any issue in your personal or professional life" and claims that "our pujas have healed incurable illnesses, removed blockages and brought love and light into countless lives." How can the same blessings that arise when one is *in person* lighting lamps and incense and repeating mantras in front of a holy image actually reach the devotee halfway around the world who is merely watching a computer screen? In the words of Narayan Shastri, the Brahman priest working for Shubhpuja.com, "The most important thing in a *puja* is the vibrations; as long as the devotee is following the actions with her own hand and saying the mantras, the sound travels the same whether it's through the air or through a mobile phone."

## *Asian Religions Transplanted in the West*

Asian religions have been very readily conveyed to the West, as so many Westerners have found the various spiritual practices meaningful and therapeutic. Yogic meditation, whether in its Hindu or Buddhist forms, has made surprising inroads into American religious life since the mid-twentieth century.

**Transcendental Meditation** An example of an Asian religion moving West, yet another manifestation of the globalization process, the mantra system of meditation known by its trademarked name, Transcendental Meditation (TM), first came to

global public attention in the 1960s when its founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, became the guru of the Beatles, who were then at the height of their popularity.

The Maharishi taught that the desire to enjoy life is natural, holding that TM offers the most efficient path to this joy. One need not become an ascetic, fasting and meditating for endless hours; twenty minutes, twice a day, could suffice to bring spiritual transformation. Drawing on traditional teachings from the Vedanta school of Hinduism, the Maharishi taught that happiness could be achieved by tapping into one's naturally serene self, a fragment of the universal and ultimate reality Brahman that all beings share. This is accomplished by stopping all distracting thoughts so that one's consciousness can reach its true center.

Becoming a practitioner was made fairly easy. An introductory lecture discusses the philosophy and scientific benefits of TM. In a second meeting, more advanced information is provided and the seeker is initiated. A short period of fasting precedes the initiation, and an offering of fruit, flowers, and money is brought to the event. Then, the seeker is given a personal mantra, a secret Sanskrit phrase attuned to the individual's unique needs and temperament, which is to be chanted silently in daily meditation. This mantra must never be revealed to anyone. The initiation rites are followed by three days of supervised meditation and small-group discussions. After ten days, the initiate returns for a check-up on proper practice by his or her teacher and, after that, can come to devotional meetings once a month.

Initially a countercultural protest against the commercial techno-bureaucracy ("the system") of modern society, TM soon adapted to its popularity by establishing its own bureaucracy. In the 1970s, the movement began to market itself to corporations, presenting workshops to upper-level managers as a way of creating more efficient and happier professionals both on and off the job. To achieve scientific legitimacy, the organization did studies that showed that twenty minutes of meditation twice a day improved sleep, increased oxygen consumption, and made one more creative and happier in life. Like many of the new age movements, and perhaps more than most, TM offered a minimal set of required beliefs and a simple, methodical set of practices aimed at self-perfection, all attuned to the needs of busy individuals in a modern, scientifically and technologically oriented culture.

**Zen Center and Immigrant Buddhism in the United States** **Zen** is a Japanese translation of the word *Chan*, which is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning "meditation." The master Bodhidharma is said to have brought this form of Buddhism from India to China in the fifth century CE, and is acknowledged as the first patriarch of the Chinese tradition of Chan. He defined Zen as centered in transformative experience rather than in texts or a set of doctrines:

A special tradition outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words or letters;
Direct pointing at the soul of man;
Seeing into one's own nature, and the attainment of Buddhahood.[2]

Zen emphasizes the spiritual practice of sitting still (ideally cross-legged in the "lotus position") with an empty mind free of all distractions and emotions. The goal is to take this "mindful" state of awareness, free of ego and attachments, back into all everyday activities. According to Zen teaching, you cannot know who you are, and what reality is, just by "believing" some doctrines or truths. You can only know your true nature, and the true nature of all reality, by experiencing *satori,* a breakthrough that transforms the mind to utter peace and clarity.

Japanese monks brought this school of Chinese Buddhism to Japan in 1200, and it thrived among the samurai who ruled premodern Japan and up until the present. Buddhist monks first came to America in the 1880s to serve immigrant Japanese communities in Hawaii and California, but Zen Buddhism did not reach a broader audience until the 1950s and 1960s. The stories of eccentric Zen masters appealed to the Beat movement of the 1950s that involved novelists and poets like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder; it also resonated with 1960s counterculture, which latched on to the unconventionality of Zen stories to critique the staid, middle-class life in America. Authors like Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki also played a major role in bringing this interpretation of Zen to popular attention. (They neglected to mention, however, that in Japan Zen Buddhist monastic training has always more resembled military training than the "anything goes" image of Zen in the West.)

As of 2020, Zen meditation centers can be found in most large cities around the world; it has been especially influential in the art and literary world. Zen in America, as in modern Japan, has been very flexible in its openness to non-Buddhists and in allowing women to become spiritual leaders. Several Jesuit priests in America have even been recognized as Zen masters.

It is noteworthy that what constitutes Buddhism in the "Zen Center" mode dramatically contrasts with the Buddhist monastery-temples being built by Asian immigrant communities settled in the West. The latter place great emphasis on a schedule of rituals, family events, and funeral rites. These centers of Buddhism in America are typically cultural "anchors" where same-country immigrants gather to teach home-country language to children and provide support for new arrivals.

**Christian Churches in Asia** Just as traditionally Asian religions flourished in the West, so, too, have "Western" religions, particularly Christianity, flourished in Asia. Throughout that region, numerous independent, indigenous Christian churches and movements have been established, often inspired by nationalism, biblical fundamentalism, or charismatic leaders. Prior to communist rule in China, a number of apocalyptic churches arose, and after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), these exploded into independent house churches. These unregistered Protestant Christians join those officially identified. Since 1980, this latter group has been known collectively as the China Christian Council. As of this writing, the Vatican is still in final negotiations in uniting the unregistered (underground) Catholic Church with the Catholic community overseen by the Chinese government.

Christians have long been accused of bringing a kind of imperialism to their missions. It is very aligned with the dynamic of colonialism we have seen throughout this book. But such is not the case today. As we have noted, Asians are often pluralistic in their faith practices, and that often includes Christian practices as well. Christians also know well that they are a minority faith. Perhaps the most telling expression of an open posture is found in the Catholic Church. In 1970, bishops from all the bishop conferences in Asia formed an umbrella Conference: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The agenda of the conference was, above all, to proceed in a "triple dialogue" with their fellow Asians: with the poor, supporting justice and liberation; with cultures, ensuring the church be fully immersed in the culture; and with other Asian religions, pursuing interreligious hospitality and mutual learning and support. In 1997, the FABC issued "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today." This text highlighted the possibilities of commonly honoring the multiple religious world Asians live in. The bishops write:

> The "Spirit" could be understood as the human or divine Spirit. In nontheistic religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, or Taoism, it stands for the "given" human potentiality to speak, seek, and find total human liberation. But in the biblical, and some other theistic, traditions, this potentiality tends to be regarded as the divine Spirit operating immanently in the human person. In either case, the diversity of tongues which defines the activity of the Spirit argues for religious pluralism."[3]

## The Postmodern Challenge in the West: An Alternative to Fundamentalism and Atheism

The difference between fundamentalists and modernists in the Euro-American world stems from an argument about the impact of science on traditional religious beliefs. Theistic fundamentalists often seem to believe they must oppose science in order to reaffirm their supernatural belief system; atheistic fundamentalists believe that they must oppose all that is associated with religion in order to affirm scientific beliefs. Modernist religious adherents embrace science, seeing the possibility of finding a rational balance between science and supernatural religious beliefs.

That said, traditional theistic fundamentalists have generally had no objection to the use of science to invent things like the automobile or to create better medications. But when scientific facts impinge on religious beliefs concerning the origins of humanity or the moral laws around which to order society, many draw a line. Thus, in our discussion of Christianity in Chapter 1, we pointed to the challenges modern science brought by its calling into question the very existence of God. Those who believe that secularization is robbing humanity of an understanding of its sacred origins reject scientific-technologized understandings of self and society. As an antidote, they favor a return to the sacred fundamental truths about human nature that governed life in premodern times.

Traditional religious fundamentalists express the desire to preserve the sacredness of human identity in a rightly ordered society against what they perceive as

the chaos of today's decadent, normless, secular relativism. Secular fundamentalists express a desire to preserve the sacredness of the scientific and rational way of life against the chaos and sporadic violence by diverse forms of religious absolutism. To restore the normative sacred order, religious fundamentalists tend to affirm the desirability of achieving the premodern ideal of society with one religion. In the case of secular fundamentalism, what is to be preserved is the sacredness of the way of life made possible by scientific rationality in an age of progress. Both religious and atheistic fundamentalists remain uncomfortable with the religious diversity that thrives in a secular society.

What we are calling religious postmodernism, like religious modernism, accepts secularization and religious pluralism. But religious postmodernism, like fundamentalism, rejects the modernist solution of privatizing religious belief and practice and seeks a public role for religion. It differs from fundamentalism, however, in that it rejects the domination of society by a single religion. Religious postmodernists insist that there is a way for religious communities, in all their diversity, to shape the public order and so rescue society from secular relativism. The chief example of this option is the model established by Mohandas K. Gandhi. Because his disciples rejected the privatization of religion while affirming religious diversity, Gandhi's movement must be defined as a postmodern, new age religious movement rather than a modernist one.

## Religions Today and the Nation-State: Civil Religion

In most times and most places throughout the history of civilization, religion and politics permeated all of culture and were like two sides of the same coin. It was, as we have seen, modernity that introduced secular nation-states and the idea that government should not impose on citizens the obligation to join or practice any particular religion. But having removed religion as a legitimizer of their own authority, these modern states faced a new problem—namely, winning loyalty from their citizens without the traditional appeal to religion. This need is both necessary and serious: nations ask young people to be soldiers willing to sacrifice their lives for them, and citizens must through taxes regularly offer a portion of their income to sustain them.

The result has been the creation of a distinct entity that scholars call *civil religion*. Civil religions represent a key domain in which new religious traditions can play very traditional roles in postcolonial societies. Civil religion is based on a sacred narrative of the state's founding, in which the development of the nation is portrayed as a just moral enterprise. Typically, the state's leaders developed a set of national rituals and yearly holidays (holy days) that celebrate and allow the regular, solemn reliving of key events in the nation's history. The central beliefs of each nation's civil religion are expressed in national anthems and patriotic songs, in school textbooks that emphasize

the righteousness of the country's founders, and at war memorials honoring those who sacrificed their lives for the nation.

In many cases, the cultural pattern from one tradition (Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, etc.) clearly comes to underlie the nation's civil religion, though seldom to the extent of specific endorsement. What is striking is how nearly all the great ideas in the history of religions (e.g., sacrifice, sage, prophet, martyrdom, sacred center, "chosen people," rebirth, and millennialism) have been adopted across the world in the service of creating and sustaining the civil religions. Two modern examples will illustrate this: Chinese communist civil religion and civil religion in the United States.

## Civil Religion in Communist China: Diffuse Traditions and Marx's Secular Apocalyptic Vision

When the Red Army gained control of mainland China in 1949, Communist Party leader Mao Zedong ascended the southern gateway to the emperor's old palace (the "Forbidden City") to proclaim the creation of the People's Republic of China. This moment was later pictured on currency and in popular prints, and soon thereafter, an immense portrait of Chairman Mao was mounted above this site of the state's origin. Over the next twenty-five years, the Chinese Communist Party drew on a variety of religious conceptions and practices to legitimate its position in China and to wield power. Essential to this was the communist millennial doctrine of a final age of harmony imported from Russian revolutionaries. Early on, the government integrated this with ancient Confucian imperial doctrine to promote the cult of Mao himself as the sage-philosopher leader of the nation. His words and teachings were pivotal for national salvation, and his character radiated the morality of communist truth.

Mao Zedong, founder of the People's Republic of China.

Statues of Mao were put up in public spaces around the nation. His portrait replaced images of family ancestors in home shrines, and during the Cultural Revolution, his "Little Red Book" became a sacred text to be memorized, followed, and always possessed. Officially, the Communist Party disavowed religion as superstition and railed at long-dead Chinese emperors as feudal exploiters of the masses. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see how party strategists adapted powerful religious ideas from both European and Chinese traditions to create a civil religion to confirm the legitimacy of its dictatorship. In recent years, as belief in Marxist-Communist doctrine has declined to near irrelevance, the Party leadership has staked its legitimacy on support for religions faithfully adapted to the nation: Confucianism (morality, ancestor rituals), Daoism, and Buddhism.

## American Civil Religion: Vision of a "City on a Hill"

Civil religion as found in the United States developed from European colonization, justifying the history of American ancestors claiming the land "from sea to shining sea" as being part of a divine plan unfolding in its "manifest destiny." God is said to have given America as a "promised land" to those who are his "chosen people" to foster the sacred values of freedom and democracy. Thus, the narrative of American civil religion presents the United States as a "city on a hill," called by God to be a model for all nations.

Although founded by those who consciously avoided the establishment of any state religion, American civil religion, according to sociologist Robert Bellah, appeals to George Washington as the "Father" of the country while Abraham Lincoln is its "Savior," who led the nation from the sin of slavery through the crisis of civil war, dying in the service of the sacred land and leading to its moral and spiritual renewal. National holidays such as Presidents' Day, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving celebrate American civil religion. Hundreds of movies celebrate this religion as well. The rituals of these celebrations connect patriotism to the sacredness of the American way of life and God's special blessings on the United States.

President Ronald Reagan frequently used religious images to speak about the United States.

As the record of the recent past makes clear, civil religion has had the purpose of focusing on the official story of assimilating individuals and diverse ethnic and religious groups into what its leaders wanted to be seen as the new, just, and righteous nation. But in practice, civil religion can also be seen as the narrative representing the self-serving rhetoric of a country's dominant group. For example, the doctrine of "manifest destiny" and the words of songs like "This Land Is Your Land" have the effect of erasing the reality of the Native American presence in North American before the arrival of the Europeans, and how they endured generations of genocidal acts by the U.S. government. It also evades acknowledgment of the "original sin" of American history, the enslavement of Africans beginning in 1619. Similarly, the civil religions of China and the Soviet Union have been harnessed to legitimize the mistreatment and killing of millions of dissidents to achieve the religious vision of a communist utopia.

## The Future of World Religions Amidst Global Crises

### Ecological Crises and Global Climate Emergency

Human presence on the earth is now so lopsided and unwisely sustained that nearly half of the world's ice-free land is required to grow our food supply. This is pushing other species to extinction as we invade habitats, poach animals, and then find bacteria and viruses that jump from the other species to humans. Humanity faces habitat collapse as well as pandemics that can, as we now know, thrash our economies, crash our lives, and expose the weaknesses of civilization. In 2018, the United Nations warned that if the trendline of warming cannot be stopped from spinning out of control by 2030, thousands of species will go extinct, unable to cope with changes brought on by rising temperatures. How do the world religions figure into this great existential challenge?

It cannot be denied that there are doctrines in the world's religions that have helped bring on this crisis, and even made things worse. Many Christian fundamentalists regard the end of the world as near, and so feel that this concern with the planet is irrelevant and, in any case, the solution should be left in God's hands. The "otherworldly" focus of many world religions—in which believers adopt the position that the next world (heaven or hell), not this one, is what is ultimately important—has created resistance to taking action since the earth is simply a testing place or temporary waiting room for their future life in eternity. Many Christians and Muslims have conceptualized life in these terms for centuries. But so have some Hindu philosophers, who have taught that life in this world is *maya* (illusion) and need not be improved but transcended. And Buddhist teachers have also taught to similar effect—that seekers

ought to focus on impermanence, the emptiness of phenomena, and purifying one's consciousness, not on the material world. Religion has certainly also been a big part of the problem in not resisting the environmental degradations of air, land, and water that has increased exponentially since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution; likewise, they have not advocated for checking population growth such that after reaching 4 billion people in the mid-twentieth century, humans number 7.8 billion now and will likely reach 11 billion in eighty years. So world religions have now, in many ways, become a detriment to human flourishing in planetary terms, given the global climate crisis.

Fortunately, this is not the end of the story of ecology and religions. Since all religious traditions speak with many voices, religious leaders of all faiths have for the past thirty years been active in harnessing the "cultural resources," the wisdom and wise practices in religious traditions relating to the conservation of the environment. Some began thinking in new ways to meet the crisis. New theologies, interpretations of scripture, and prophetic voices have emerged across the world religions, trying to change minds and support governmental policies to resist the worst. For example, a broad-based climate activism has emerged among Evangelical Christians, who argue that since God created our world and deemed it in the Bible as "good," humans have no choice but to be caretakers of creation as the end times are uncertain. Protestant theologian Sallie McFague (1933–2019) goes further. Asserting that a theology that does not take account of humanity's power to poison the earth and end creation is not dealing with reality, McFague defines the earth as "God's body" and sees human devastation of it and its climate as humanity "crucifying God."

A third example of the creativity of modern religious thought is scientist James Lovelock (b. 1919). He has posited what might be considered a religious view of "Mother Earth" in his *Gaia Hypothesis*: that the entire earth is a life-forming and life-sustaining superorganism, subject to homeostasis; that individual species are not permanent, only life alone is; and that "Mother Earth" can be accommodating or ruthless with species, humans included, so that "Those who keep the environment fit survive; those that don't, do not."

## World Religions Today and the Covid Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has been global in scope, threatening all nations, peoples, ethnicities, religions, and economic classes. Religious gatherings in mosques, temples, synagogues, and churches were suspended for months, undermining the two essential functions of religion: to *bind communities* around rituals and in communities of shared beliefs, and to foster humanity *being careful* about the unseen and what matters most. In normal times the objects of religious giving, many religious institutions have instead spent their resources on charity, donating funds and medical supplies both locally and around the world. Some provided food to overworked medical professionals as well.

The Covid-19 epidemic made it tragically clear that globalization brings dangers as well as benefits across the world today. The crisis challenged religious leaders and ritualists to respond in coherent ways to serve the common good of humanity.

All world religions have also risen to the mortal dangers of the pandemic by offering extraordinary rituals of healing. Some were online, such as mass group prayers shared by thousands using meeting programs: Hindu priests chanted mantras, their sounds intended to protect and heal; Buddhists in Korea broadcast massive rituals dedicated to the Medicine Buddha and the bodhisattva Guanyin, petitioning them to

extend their compassionate healing powers to all humanity; Buddhists in Sri Lanka chanted the Buddha's protective words over water pots, then hired a helicopter to carry the protective liquid over the international airport and splash it over the airplanes there! Protective amulets worn on the wrist or around the neck were created, blessed, and disbursed by Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist ritualists as well.

The pandemic revealed how important religious rituals are in human life, especially during times of crisis. The highly contagious virus prevented family members from being with the dying and the dead, with this isolation causing deep suffering for both victims and their families. Funerals had to be cancelled or postponed, and only very small groups could have their mourning eased by traditions of scripture reading, prayer, and eulogy.

The 2020 global pandemic forcefully made people across the earth aware that the world is now interconnected and interdependent as never before, and that countries and their leaders are not yet prepared to act in ways that are adequate to the challenges. It will be curious how this now-blazing reality will impact the world's religions: Will the recognition of this interconnected world impact the "world views" of religious adherents? Will Confucians, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and others alter their ethical beliefs and practices to impact the new nexus between human health and the environment?

## "Passing Over": World Citizenship Facing Global Challenges

All the great world religions date back a millennium or more, and each provided a grand metanarrative for the premodern civilization in which it emerged—in the Middle East, in India, and in China. In the past, some of these world religions were relatively isolated from one another. Thus, there were many histories in the world, each shaped by a great metanarrative, but no global history.

The perspective of religious postmodernism arises from a dramatically different situation. We are in a new millennium, which is marked by the development of a global civilization. The diverse spiritual heritages of the human race have become the common inheritance of all. Modern changes have ended the isolation of the past, and people following one great tradition now very likely live in proximity to adherents of other faiths. New age religion has tapped this condition of globalization in two different ways. In its modernist forms, it has privatized the religious quest as a quest for the perfection of the self. In its postmodern forms, without rejecting self-transformation, it has turned that goal outward, in forms of social organization committed to bettering society and bringing personal and social transformation into balance.

The time when a new world religion could be founded has passed, argues John Dunne in his book *The Way of All the Earth*. What is required today is not the conquest of the world by any one religion or culture but a meeting and sharing of religious

and cultural insights. "The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Buddha or Jesus or Mohammed, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over with sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time."[4]

Dunne joins a host of religious scholars, as well as many spiritual adventurers, who have found "passing over" into another religion and then "coming back" to their home tradition an extraordinarily fruitful endeavor. One not only sympathetically experiences the religious other, but also sees one's own tradition differently because of that encounter. There is a saying: "To learn a foreign language is to learn a different way of thinking." Similarly, learning other religious "languages" can allow one to comprehend the world through different lenses, and doing so inevitably leads to understanding one's own religion differently. Buddhism, for example, might challenge the non-Buddhist to rigorously consider the subjectivity of the mind or the interconnectedness of the universe. The Daoist relationship between yin and yang might allow one to better understand how to negotiate the moment, whether to take a posture of assertion or receptivity, and how these postures might balance each other.

Consider the cross-fertilization of insights in the biographies of four great twentieth-century spiritual and cultural giants: Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), and Thich Nhat Hahn (b. 1926).

## Leo Tolstoy

Tolstoy was a member of the Russian nobility and became famous through his novels, such as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Although nominally a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, he was not religious. In his fifties, Tolstoy went through a period of great despair that resolved itself in a powerful religious conversion experience. After deciding to take Jesus's Sermon on the Mount as a personal blueprint, Tolstoy freed his serfs, gave away all his wealth, and spent the rest of his life serving the poor.

Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian novelist, whose writings on Jesus's Sermon on the Mount inspired Gandhi.

A key factor in his conversion was the influence of a story. It was about a wealthy young Indian prince named Josaphat who gave up all his wealth and power to embark on a spiritual quest for the answer to the problems of old age, sickness, and death. On this quest, he met Barlaam, a Christian monk, who told him a story: Once upon a time, there was a man who fell into a deep well, but saved his life by grasping onto two vines. Trapped in this situation, he saw two mice, one white and the other black, come along and begin to chew on the vines. The man knew his life would surely end as he waited and they finished, as he would then plunge to his death.

The story, Barlaam explained, is a spiritual allegory. The two mice represent the cycle of day and night, the passing of time that brings us closer to death. The challenge is to not cling to life in fear. And there is a paradox: the

## "Saint Buddha": An Ancient Tale with a Thousand Faces

The story of the Indian prince who became a Christian saint was originally the story of the Buddha. Versions of the story and parable can be found in almost all the world's religions, recorded in dozens of languages. The Greek version came into Christianity from an Islamic version, which was passed on to Judaism as well. Muslims apparently got it from members of a Gnostic group in Persia, who got it from Buddhists in India. The Latin name *Josaphat* is a translation of the Greek *Loasaf*, which is translated from the Arabic *Yudasaf*, which comes from the Persian *Bodisaf*, which itself is a translation of *Bodhisattva*, the Sanskrit title for a person on the path to enlightenment. So Tolstoy's conversion was brought about in some measure by the story of the Buddha.

man in the well must do something and let go of the vines, so to speak. He can only save his life by being willing to risk losing it, and not clinging; by overcoming his fear, and surrendering himself to whatever the divine ordained, he could hope to live. Inspired by this allegory and the spiritual truth it contained, Josaphat became a saint.

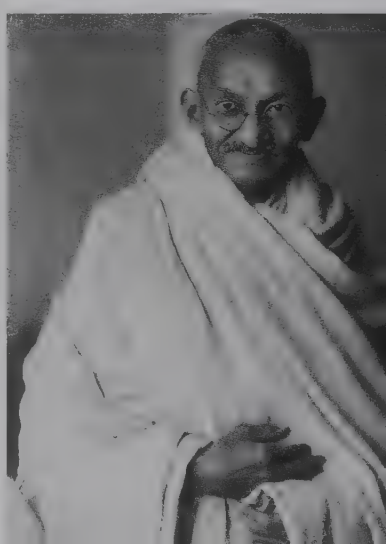
Tolstoy was immensely moved by the story, and it helped lead him to surrender his fears, bringing about his own spiritual rebirth. The new Tolstoy authored *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, which advocates a life of nonviolent resistance to evil based on the Sermon on the Mount. Tolstoy had great spiritual influence across Europe in his day.

"I simply want to tell the story of numerous experiments with truth, and my life consists of nothing but these experiments. . . . They are spiritual, or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality."[5]

—Mohandas K. Gandhi

### Mohandas K. Gandhi

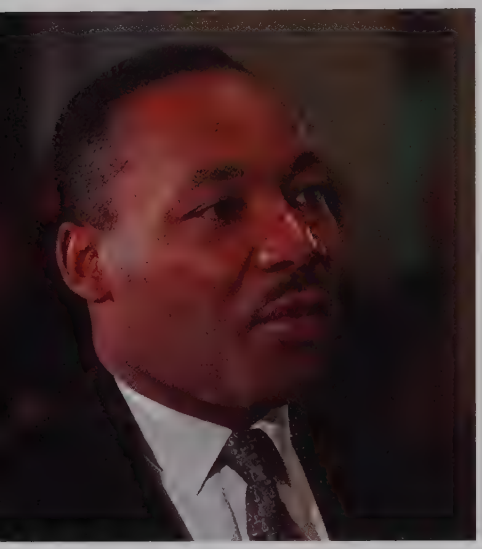
Gandhi, who studied law in England, was convinced by European friends in London to read Tolstoy, as well as the Hindu classic text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. This text has to do with a battle about to begin. The incarnate god Krishna urges Arjuna, the general of the army, to perform his duty as a warrior and fight for a just cause. But Gandhi read the text as a spiritual allegory, about the inner battle to become free of greed, hatred, and delusion. Inspired by Tolstoy, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and the *Bhagavad Gita*'s call to renounce attachment to worldly rewards, Gandhi had discovered the spiritual foundations that would enable him to challenge British colonial injustice back in Hindu-majority India, and to do so with nonviolent protest underwritten by universal love.



Mohandas K. Gandhi, whose techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience led to the liberation of India from British colonial rule in 1947.

### Martin Luther King Jr.

King was extraordinarily influenced by Gandhi's doctrine of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence. Gandhi died when King was a teenager, but later, King read his writings and even once traveled to India to study the effects of



Martin Luther King Jr., who led the civil rights movement for racial equality in the United States using the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience inspired by Gandhi.

Gandhi's teachings on Indian society. He returned to his own religion and culture enriched with new insights. King did not become a Hindu any more than Gandhi became a Christian, but they both "crossed over" and returned with fresh eyes to their own religious tradition.

By their lives, Gandhi and King demonstrated that, contrary to the fears raised by fundamentalism, adopting common ethical norms and sharing spiritual wisdom across traditions does not require abandoning one's religious identity. Instead, they acted as models of embracing "unity in diversity." The religious metanarratives of the world's civilizations may have become "smaller narratives" in the age of global diversity, but they have not lost their power. Both Gandhi and King remained in their own tradition, but each was influenced and even empowered by the other.

## Thich Nhat Hanh

The Buddhist monk and anti–Vietnam War activist Thich Nhat Hanh, whom his friend Martin Luther King had nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, received the news of King's death in 1968 while at an interreligious conference in New York City. Only the previous spring, King had expressed his opposition to the Vietnam War, largely at the urging of Thich Nhat Hanh and other anti-war activists. Even with King now dead, the spiritual and ethical vision he shared with his friends, across religions and cultures, has continued to inspire followers throughout the world, including Thich Nhat Hanh.

A Buddhist monk from Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh was once targeted for assassination but survived to lead the Buddhist peace delegation to the Paris peace negotiations in 1973. By working together to protest racial injustice and the violence of war, Thich Nhat Hanh demonstrated that religious and cultural pluralism can play a role in shaping public life in an age of globalization, with nonviolence a core principle. The path to peace shared in the doctrines of Buddhism and all religions, he argued, is not to humiliate and defeat an enemy but to show "loving kindness" to win him or her over, bringing about not only justice but also reconciliation. Thich Nhat Hanh agreed with King that the goal was to attack the evil in systems, not to attack persons. The common Christian and Buddhist ideal is to love one's enemy, not in the sense of sentimental affection but in the constructive sense of seeking the opponent's well-being. Both argued nonviolence is more than just a remedy for social injustices; it is, they were convinced, essential to the survival of humanity in an age of nuclear weapons. The choice, King once said, was "no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."[6]

A Buddhist monk meditates during a moment of silence near the finish line of the Boston Marathon bombings on the one-week anniversary of the April 15, 2013, attack.

Truth is to be found in all religions, Thich Nhat Hanh and King said many times. They agreed as well that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."[7]

## TEACHINGS OF RELIGIOUS WISDOM: Thich Nhat Hanh on the Shared Wisdom of Buddhism and Christianity

In his writings, especially *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh insists that religious language is about direct religious experience, not about abstract metaphysical beliefs. On this, he says, both Buddhist and Christian contemplative monks agree.

> Once the ultimate is touched, all notions are transcended: birth, death, being, non-being, before, after, one, many and so forth. Questions like "Does God exist?" or "Does nirvana exist?" are no longer valid. God and nirvana as concepts have been transcended. . . . For the one who has had an experience of God or nirvana, the question "Does God exist?" is an indication of the lack of insight. (p. 189) . . . The practices of prayer and meditation help us touch the most valuable seeds that are within us and they put us in contact with the ground of our being. . . . When the energy of mindfulness is present, transformation takes place. When the energy of the Holy Spirit is within you, understanding, love, peace, and stability are possible. God is within. You are, yet you are not, but God is in you. This is interbeing. This is non-self. (pp. 167–68)

Source: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, Riverhead Books, 1995).

"Buddhism today," writes Thich Nhat Hanh, "is made up of non-Buddhist elements, including Jewish and Christian ones." And likewise with every tradition. "We have to allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us." The purpose of such "passing over" into the other's tradition is to allow each to return to his or her own tradition transformed. What is astonishing, says Nhat Hanh, is that we will find kindred spirits in other traditions with whom we share more than we do with many in our own tradition.[8]

Throughout his long life, Thich Nhat Hanh has established communities focused on traditional Zen teachings and meditation practices, while also creatively linking Buddhist ideas with those from other religions to engage in global environmental activism and peacemaking, "We need a collective awakening. One Buddha is not enough. All of us have to become Buddhas in order for our planet to have a chance. Fortunately, we have the power to wake up, to touch enlightenment from moment to moment, in our very own ordinary and, yes, busy lives. So let's start right now. Peace is your every breath."[9]

## The Future of Religion in an Age of Globalization

Will the global future of religion and civilization be shaped by this Gandhian model of new age spiritual practice? It clearly offers an alternative to both the traditionalist status quo and the fundamentalist rejection of modernization and secularization. And it can lead to the sanctification of life and the promotion of an ethic of human dignity across religions and cultures. The challenge is that "passing over" does require seeing the religions and cultures of others as having wisdom to share, and not all will accept this presupposition. Nevertheless, the emergence of religious postmodernism means that in the future, the struggle among religions will most likely not be so much between fundamentalism and modernism, nor between theists and atheists, but between religious fundamentalist exclusivism and postmodern religious pluralism—both as forms of religion that shape not only private but also public life.

What is certain is that religion is not going away but will continue as a powerful force in culture and politics that exerts profound effects on the human future. There is no better way to understand the world today, and to deepen the adventure of your own life, than to continue to explore the world's religions. We hope that this textbook has provided a starting point for your own journeys.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between a "new religion" and a "new age religion"?
2. How do modernist new age religious belief and practice differ from postmodernist new age religious belief and practice? Give an example of each.

3. How do protests by native Americans and African Americans engage with the traditions of American civil religion?
4. In what sense is "civil religion" a new way of being religious, and in what sense is it a very old way of being religious?
5. What do the authors mean by suggesting that in a postmodern society, atheism can itself become a form of fundamentalism?
6. In what way is the postmodern path of religious ethics opened up by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. similar to fundamentalist ideals for society, and in what way is it different?

## Suggested Readings


Bromley, David G., and Douglas E. Cowan. *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

Bruce, Steve. *Religion in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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Lewis, James R., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Melton, J. Gordon. *Finding Enlightenment* (Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing, 1998).

Rothstein, Mikael, ed. *New Age Religion and Globalization* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2001).

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, John Grim, and Willis J. Jenkins. *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2016).


## Additional Resources

Cults a.k.a. New Religious Movements, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (http://www.religioustolerance.org/cultmenu.htm, http://www.religioustolerance.org/cultmenu.htm). This site devoted to religious tolerance offers comprehensive, balanced information on new religions, "cults," and the anti-cult and counter-cult movements. Principal new religions are profiled, including their history, beliefs, practices, publications, and conflicts with

government or other groups. Offers an overview of the conflicts, including references supporting the various sides of the conflicts.

New Hindu Ritual Catering Service, a website employing Brahmin priests to do orthopraxy rituals for distant Hindu clients and provide advice on the choice of spiritual practices (https://shubhpuja.com).

Yale Forum on Ecology and Religion, a website with a wealth of resources on the traditional beliefs and practices of the world's religions regarding the natural world, and recent initiatives undertaken to address environmental protection and global climate change (https://fore.yale.edu/).

## Notes

1. https://secularhumanism.org/what-is-secular-humanism/secular-humanism-defined/
2. Attributed to Bodhidharma as quoted in Heinrich Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism: A History, Vol. 1, India and China, James Heisig and Paul Knitter, trans. New York: Macmillan, 1999, p. 85.
3. As cited in Peter Phan, *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), p. 202.
4. John Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), p. ix.
5. M. K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth: Mahatma Gandhi's Autobiography* (New York: CreateSpace, 2016), p. 30.
6. Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," given on March 31, 1968. Found at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/liberation-curriculum/classroom-resources/king-quotes-war-and-peace (11/24/2020)
7. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in King, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 85.
8. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, Riverhead Books, 1995), pp. 9, 11.
9. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Breath: A Practice for Our Busy Lives* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011), p. 18.

# GLOSSARY

**abbot:** the head and spiritual guide in a monastery

**Adi Granth:** scripture worshipped by Sikhs

**African Initiated Churches:** churches in Africa that left behind Protestant affiliations and developed a hybrid of traditional African beliefs and Pentecostalism

**ahimsa:** nonviolence

**All Souls Festival:** summer event when families perform rituals to connect the living with their ancestors and ensure ancestors' comfort in the afterlife

**Allah:** God

**Amaterasu:** kami of the sun; progenitor of Japanese imperial line

**Amitabha/Amida:** celestial Buddha whose Pure Land became the most popular in East Asia

***Analects*:** collection of sayings attributed to Confucius

**anatman:** "no-atman"; the doctrine denying the reality of a permanent, immortal soul or ego at the center of a person

**ancestor veneration:** worship, feeding, and petitioning of the souls of dead ancestors

**anchoritic monasticism:** life of a monk who after sufficient guidance would live alone, focused on prayer and fasting

**animism:** belief in an inner soul that gives life and identity to living things and emphasizes rituals in which humans interact with other souls

**apologists:** Christian intellectuals who defended the faith against outside critique

**apostles:** refers to Jesus's closest disciples; literally "to send out"

**arhats:** enlightened beings; term applied to the Buddha and his disciples

**Arya Samaj:** religious organization that redefined and defended reformed Hindu traditions

**Ashkenazi:** Jews whose traditions originated in central and eastern Europe

**Ashoka:** ruler whose patronage spread Buddhist institutions and teachings across his empire, and likely beyond

**ashram:** center of religious practice following a guru

**atman:** the soul, which transmigrates after death

**Avalokiteshvara/Guanyin:** celestial Mahayana bodhisattva, popular across Asia

**avataras:** incarnations of a god that descend to earth to assist creation and fight evil

**avidya:** existential ignorance

**baptism:** rite of Christian initiation

***Bhagavad Gita*:** Hindu scripture extolling the divinity of Krishna and yogas needed for liberation; part of the epic *Mahabharata*

**bhakti:** devotionalism to a Hindu divinity

**Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** Hindu nationalist political party

***bhikshu*:** Buddhist monk

***bhikshuni*:** Buddhist nun

**bodhisattva:** a "future Buddha," either in the present life or in a future life

**Brahman:** unchanging world spirit that arises at creation

**brahmins:** highest caste, many serving as priests

**Buddha-nature school:** Mahayana belief that all beings possess a "Buddha seed" or "enlightenment seed" as part of their natures

**Bwiti:** West Central African syncretic religion

**Caesaro-papism:** the political and religious entwinement where the emperor understood himself as head of the church as well as the state

**caitya:** Buddhist shrine

**caliphs:** successors of Muhammad as political and military leaders of the Muslim community

**canon:** officially approved texts of the Old and New Testaments

**Ch'an:** Mahayana school emphasizing meditation, discipline, and individual effort to reach nirvana

**Ch'ondogyo:** Korean movement reaffirming the truth of human dignity and the vitality of Daoism and Confucianism

**circular time:** awareness, especially in hunter-gatherer societies, life follows the same recurring cycle of time determined by the sun, moon, and the seasons

**Cittamatra:** Mahayana philosophical school that focuses on consciousness as the center of spiritual realization

**city god:** Chinese deity who oversees a city's spirits and to whom every family's kitchen god reports at year's end

**coenobitic monasticism:** life of monks who lived together in a monastery for mutual support and prayer

**colonialism:** the political, social, cultural, and economic domination of one society by another

**confessor:** Christian term for those who suffered torture for their faith but still lived

**Confucians:** culture of literate elite informed by Confucius and his disciples

**consecrated virginity:** vowing a lifelong celibate life for the sake of the kingdom of God

**Constantine:** emperor who ruled the western Roman Empire from 312 to 324 and the whole empire from 324 to 337, favored Christianity, and sought a union of Christianity and the Empire.

**Conversos:** Jews who converted to Christianity by threat of expulsion

**cosmogony:** mythological account of the world's creation

**Council of Jerusalem:** meeting of church leaders at which they decided gentiles did not have to follow Jewish Torah (Law) to be members of the church

**creed:** short summary of beliefs to be universally held

**Cultural Revolution:** period in Communist China under Mao Zedong when religious traditions and practitioners were persecuted

**dana:** "self-less giving" to diminish desire: the chief merit-making activity in Buddhist societies

**Dao:** mysterious power that moves the universe and is the source of life for all beings

**Daoists:** East Asian visionaries who advocated individualistic retreat, learning from nature, and noninterference by the state

***dar al-Islam*:** territory controlled and ruled by Muslims

**darshan:** seeing the divine; making eye contact with a god, holy site, or guru

**Daruma-san:** Japanese name of legendary Indian sage who brought Zen tradition to East Asia; a folk icon in Japan

**de:** mysterious, spontaneous energy of the universe

**dependent origination:** twelve-part formula explaining how individuals are bound to future rebirth until they extirpate desire and ignorance

**dharma:** "duty" determined by caste and gender

**Dharma:** teachings of the Buddha

***dhimmi*:** meaning "protected," refers to non-Muslim peoples who were granted religious freedom under Muslim rule in exchange for payment of a tax

**Diaspora:** the dispersion of a religious people outside their geographic homeland

**diffuse religion:** spiritual tradition centered on family and locality, informed by common ideas from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

**divine:** the highest spiritual reality; representative of the gods

**doctrine:** religious teaching of importance and expected to be accepted as part of the faith

**Dogen:** Japanese monk; founder of Soto Zen school

**dogma:** core religious teaching deemed to be essential to the faith

**double predestination:** Calvin's view that from eternity God had predestined those who would be saved and those who would be damned

**Dreamtime:** for Australian Aborigines, the time when the world was created and which exists in another realm

**ecumenical council:** gathering of all bishops to determine church teachings and policies

**Eightfold Path:** the eight qualities needed to realize nirvana

**Eisai:** Japanese monk; founder of Rinzai Zen school

**empiricism:** the philosophical position that knowledge can only be secured by experience

**engaged Buddhism:** reformist movement among global Buddhists seeking to relate the teachings to contemporary suffering

**enlightenment:** state of "nirvana" or liberation

**Eucharist:** rite of the Lord's Supper, celebrating Christ's death and resurrection and communion with God

***fatwas*:** legal opinions or interpretations from a Muslim legal expert (*mufti*)

***fiqh*:** "understanding"; human interpretation of divine law that produced Islamic law (*sharia*)

**Five Classics:** Confucian canon of five works attributed to Master K'ung

**Four Conditions:** doctrinal formula specifying the rewards for moral living and merit making

**Four Good Deeds:** doctrinal formula guiding the laity on the uses of wealth

**Four Noble Truths:** primary doctrinal formula describing human life as marked by suffering, distorted by desire, and a path to its extinction

**Full Moon Festival:** fall festival to feast with kin and celebrate the harvest moon

**fundamentalist:** one who rejects aspects of modernity and wants to return to the perceived foundational purity of an ancestral sacred social/political order or way of life

**fundamentalists:** as used here, the most conservative wing of Evangelical Protestants, who believe modern science or secular perspectives threaten Gospel truths

**Gandhara:** area of Indo-Greek interaction, influential in the creation of Buddhist art

**Gelugpa:** monastic school that politically dominated all others by 1640; its head, the Dalai Lama, ruled Tibet until 1959

**gentile:** refers to someone who is not Jewish

**Ghost Dance:** nineteenth-century Native American religious revitalization movement led by spirit mediums

**globalization:** in terms of world religions, the idea that all religions have members in almost every country or society, and that technology affords access to all key religious sites, practices, and teachers

**Gnosticism:** form of Christianity that denied Jesus was an actual human and that understood salvation as gaining secret knowledge of the divine world

**grace:** unmerited gift of God

**Guan Yu:** Chinese god of war, worshipped for protection today

**gurudwara:** Sikh temple

**gurus:** spiritual and cultural teachers, regarded by students as semidivine

***hadith*:** narrative report of Muhammad's sayings and action

***hajj*:** annual pilgrimage to Mecca, in which all adult Muslims are expected to participate at least once if physically and financially able

**Hellenization:** imposition of Greek culture on lands conquered by Alexander the Great

**heretic:** from an ancient Greek term for "one who chooses"; used to communicate the postmodern idea that everyone has no choice but to choose one's beliefs, since there is no longer a single center of "taken-for-granted, commonly shared truth" in many societies

***hijra*:** migration of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina; marks first year in Muslim lunar calendar

***Hindutva*:** "Hinduness"; Hindu identity

**Holocaust:** systematic murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators

***Homo religiosus*:** term coined by Mircea Eliade that characterizes humans as inherently religious beings

**Hong Xiuquan:** charismatic instigator of the Taiping Rebellion; claimed to be younger brother of Jesus

***hudud*:** Quranically prescribed crimes and punishments adopted by some countries and advocated by some groups as evidence of the "Islamic" nature of their political rule and law

**humanism:** Renaissance celebration of the individual

***ijma*:** in Islamic law, consensus

***ijtihad*:** interpretation or independent reasoning in Islamic law

**imam:** in Sunni Islam, the prayer leader and one who delivers the Friday sermon; in Shiah Islam, refers to Ali's descendants, who are believed to be the legitimate leaders (not the Sunni caliphs) of the global Muslim community or *ummah*

**indulgences:** the papacy's claimed power to remit penalty or "satisfaction" to God regarding one's sins

**Islam:** submission or surrender to God

***jahiliyya*:** unbelief; ignorance; used to describe the pre-Islamic era

**Janam Sakhis:** traditional stories about the life and teachings of Guru Nanak

***jihad*:** the struggle to be a good Muslim, to follow God's will; armed struggle in defense of Islam or the Muslim community; offensive warfare by Muslim leaders to spread their rule or by Muslim terrorists to legitimate their actions

**Judge:** leader of Jewish tribes around 1220–1012 BCE

**justification:** being made right or just before God

**Kabbalah:** Jewish mystical theory and practice

**Kali Yuga:** the dark age in which the world is currently

**kami:** Japanese deities associated with places, certain animals, and the emperor

**karma:** "action"; effects of actions that condition a being's future

**karuna:** "compassion," the principal Buddhist social virtue

***kerygma*:** central, basic teachings in early Christianity

**Khalsa:** "The Pure"; Sikh organization for defense of the faith

***khutba*:** sermon delivered in a mosque on Fridays

**kingdom of God:** Jesus's expression of God's rule expressed by love, justice, peace, and harmony

**kitchen god:** in China and Korea, deity residing in every household

**koans:** spiritual riddles used by Zen teachers to foster spiritual growth

**Lao Zi:** "Old Baby"; author of *Daodejing* and founder of Daoism

**li:** Confucian ethic of correct behavior, which leads to ren

**liberal Protestantism:** form of Protestant theology that is open to fundamental changes due to dialogue with the modern world

**ling:** spiritual force possessed by geographic places, deities, and sages

***Lotus Sutra*:** early Mahayana text that reveals the universal cosmic character of Buddhas and the Dharma

**Madhyamaka:** Mahayana philosophical school whose goal is to clear away all attachments, making realization possible

**Mahayana:** "Great Vehicle"; the dominant school of Buddhism in Nepal, Tibet, and East Asia

***Mahdi*:** "divinely guided one" who is expected to appear at the end of time to usher in a perfect Islamic society of peace and social justice

**Maitreya/Mi-lo Fo:** the next historical Buddha, uniquely depicted in China as corpulent and happy

**maitri:** "loving-kindness," a Buddhist ethical virtue

**Mandate of Heaven:** theory that the forces of the universe favor a ruler

**mappo:** Buddhist doctrine of world in decline

**martyr:** refers to Christians who were killed because of their faith; literally "witness"

***masjid*:** a building used for public and community worship; also known as a mosque

**Master K'ung:** given name of sage later known as Confucius

**Master Xun:** influential early Confucian exponent with emphasis on authoritarian rule

***mathas*:** Hindu monasteries

**maya:** force of illusion clouding human minds

**Mazu:** popular goddess of coastal China

**Mencius:** first major disciple of Confucius; systemized Master K'ung's thought

**metanarrative:** a grand cosmic and/or historical story accepted by the majority of a society as expressing its beliefs about its origins, destiny, and sacred identity

***minbar*:** mosque pulpit from which is preached

**Mitzvot:** God's commands or sacred deeds

**mizuko cult:** in Japan, form of Kannon devotionalism that seeks forgiveness from spirits of stillborn, miscarried, and aborted fetuses

**modern:** society that separates its citizens' lives into public and private spheres, restricting religion to private life

**modernists:** as used here, the liberal wing of Protestantism, who embraced modern science and cultural progress

**Mohandas K. Gandhi:** iconic leader who inspired mass support and led India to independence by combining religious and political reforms

**moksha:** "release" from future rebirths and deaths; salvation

**monism:** belief in the one impersonal ultimate reality

**monotheism:** the belief there is only one God

**morality:** right action

**mudang:** Korean shaman

***muftis*:** legal experts who issue *fatwas* to judges and litigants

***mujaddid*:** "renewer"; one who comes to restore and revitalize Islamic community and practice

**Muslim:** one who follows Islam

**myth:** a symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world

***n/um kausi*:** shamans of the Kung people

**Nagarjuna:** influential analytical philosopher of the Mahayana school

**nationalism:** belief in the nation as a sacred entity

**Native American Church:** modern religious group uniting native peoples of North America

**Nembutsu:** chant of Pure Land Buddhists, reflecting aspiration for rebirth in a paradise

**neo-Confucianism:** tradition seeking to harmonize early Confucian humanism with elements of Daoism and Buddhism

**neo-Shintoism/state Shinto:** reformation of Japan's indigenous religion after 1869, with the divine emperor at its center

**"new religions":** new sects formed since the nineteenth century combining elements of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism with ideas imported from the West

**Nichiren:** Japanese monk who taught that the *Lotus Sutra* is the only true Buddhist text

**Nichiren:** monk who founded new Buddhist school based on primacy of the *Lotus Sutra*

**nirguna Brahman:** impersonal form of the world spirit

**nirvana:** blissful state of liberation from rebirth, defined by the extinction of karma

**nominalism:** belief that there are no actual universals, thus separating the divine reality from human realities

**numinous:** human perception of the sacred

**Om-kara:** "Divine One"; Sikh term for the formless ultimate reality

**Oral Torah:** oral tradition that developed further understanding of the implications of the Torah

**Order of Penitents:** being placed in public penance for egregious sins and forbidden from communion

**original sin:** sin of Adam and Eve carried out through the human condition as a corruption of the soul

**orthodoxy:** acceptance of "right beliefs" based on sacred texts as explained by religious authorities

**orthopraxy:** practice of "right actions" as prescribed by sacred traditions

**pacifism:** the moral commitment to refrain from any violence, regardless of the political or social situation

**Pali Canon:** The Theravada Canon written in the Pali language (derived from Sanskrit)

**pap:** "demerit"; bad karma earned by breaking the precepts

**patriarchal sees:** ultimately five authoritative centers of Christianity, presided over a bishop who oversaw metropolitan elections of bishops

**patristic period:** era of the church from around 125 to 500, characterized by the full formation of the church, including its rites, theology, dogmas, and canon

**Peace of Augsburg:** decision by German princes and the Holy Roman Emperor that Christians would follow their prince's religious convictions as either Roman Catholic or Lutheran

**People of the Book:** those possessing a revelation or scripture from God; refers particularly to Jews and Christians

**philosophical Daoism:** tradition articulating path to harmony for individuals and society based on understanding and flowing with natural forces

**postmodern:** society typified by accepting public diversity in both religious beliefs and social practices

**prajna:** "insight" or "wisdom"; quality of mind discerning reality clearly and calmly, its completeness necessary for enlightenment

**prasad:** remains of any substance used in a puja; believed to have healing properties

**premodern:** society in which little or no separation exists between the dominant religion and social structure

**Protestant Buddhism:** pattern of reform in which Buddhists adopted perspectives of Protestant Christianity

**puja:** ritual offering and other acts of homage to a deity

**punya:** "merit"; good karma earned by moral practices, learning, and meditation

**puranas:** popular texts extolling glories of Hindu deities

***purdah*:** seclusion of women from men who are not relatives

**Pure Land:** a paradise for rebirth created by a bodhisattva, where humans can achieve enlightenment

**qi gong:** discipline of cultivating the vital individual life force

**qi:** vital life force in individuals and in nature

**Qing-Ming:** annual spring festival when Chinese tend to family graves and make offerings to the ancestors

***qiyas*:** legal term for analogical reasoning

**Quran:** Muslim scripture

**Rabbinic Judaism:** refers to Judaism in the postbiblical premodern period

**Ramakrishna Mission:** influential Hindu missionary and reform organization founded by Swami Vivekananda

**Ramanuja:** Influential theologian who emphasized worship of Brahman as Vishnu

**Rammohan Roy:** pioneering religious figure who called for the reform of Hindu beliefs and practices

**Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS):** "National Union of [Hindu] Volunteers"; group advocating "Hinduism" as devotion to "Mother India"

**rationalism:** the philosophical position that knowledge can only be secured by evidence

**religion:** the sense of being tied or bound by sacred obligations to powers believed to govern our destiny

**religious Daoism:** tradition devoted to attaining individual immortality through alchemical infusions or meditative practices

**religious institutions:** A social organization designed to insure support for essential religious specialists, providing resources (financial, architectural, educational) to insure the perpetuation of a tradition

**ren:** Confucian ideal of "being fully human"

**ritual:** actions that link the individual and the community in engaging with the sacred

**royal patronage:** system where the papacy allowed Spain and Portugal to control missionary activities and the establishment of churches and dioceses

**sacraments:** ritual symbols and actions that mediated God's grace

**sacrificial atonement:** Jewish practice of sacrifice to atone for sins; Christians saw Jesus's death as an absolute atonement for the sins of the world

**saguna Brahman:** human form of the world spirit

***salat*:** prayer performed five times each day

**samsara:** "the world" of rebirth subject to the law of karma

**samsara:** the world of rebirth subject to the law of karma and the inevitability of death

**sangha:** Buddhist monastic community

**santhara:** Jain fast unto death, in search of moksha

**Sat Guru:** "True Teacher"; Sikh term indicating the active mode of Om-kara

**satyagraha:** "grasping the truth"; Gandhi's central principle of disciplined nonviolence that reflects ethical truth

**Second Temple Period:** time after Jews returned from Babylonian exile to Roman destruction of the second temple in 70 CE

**secular:** sociologically used to mean "nonreligious"

**Sephardic:** Jews whose traditions originated in Spain and Portugal

**Septuagint:** Hebrew Bible translated into Greek and disseminated throughout the Jewish diaspora

***shahadah*:** Muslim declaration of faith

**Shaivite:** devotee of Shiva

**shaktas:** devotees of Devi

**shakti:** innate, creative force of this universe, understood as feminine

**Shang-di:** heavenly Lord, thought to preside over early Chinese pantheon

**Shankara:** influential Hindu philosopher, advocating the impersonal ultimate reality

***sharia*:** Islamic law

**Shiah:** followers of Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad

**Shinto:** indigenous religion of Japan that reveres native deities, including the Emperor

***Shoah*:** Hebrew word for the Holocaust

**shramanas:** wandering ascetics; a term applied to Buddhists, Jains, and others

**shunya:** "zero"; the term used to designate the emptiness ("*shunyata*") of all constructs

**siddha:** tantric saint

**skandhas:** "aggregates"; term used to identify each of the five main components that define a human being

**Soka Gakkai:** twentieth-century offshoot from the Nichiren school, now a global Buddhist organization seeking world peace

**Son of David:** designation of Jesus as messiah, or anointed king in the line of David

**Son of Man:** a self-reference of Jesus that involves being an apocalyptic figure prophesied by Daniel

**sorcerers:** mediums who manipulate the spirit world, often for their own benefit rather than on behalf of the community

**spirit flight:** shaman's attempt to locate another person's soul in another realm

**spirit medium/shaman:** person who communicates with deities and spirits through ritually induced trance

**Sthaviravadins:** traditionalists among early Buddhist monastic schools

**stupas:** Buddhist shrines containing the relics of a Buddha or enlightened saint

**Sufis:** Muslim mystics

**Sufism:** Islamic mysticism

**Sunnah:** example set by Muhammad of living the principles of the Quran

**Sunni:** Muslims who accept the Sunnah and the historic succession of the Caliphs

***surahs*:** chapters of the Quran

**sympathetic imagination:** empathy; necessary to understand the religious languages and messages of different times and places

**syncretism:** combination of elements from different belief systems

**T'oegyehak:** modern Korean Confucian group based on teachings of master Yi T'oegye

**taboo:** action or object that is normally forbidden

**Taiping Rebellion:** violent revolt led by Chinese converts to Christianity, who established a separate state with its capital in Nanjing

**Talmud:** compendium of laws and commentary, making up the Oral Torah

**Tanakh:** name for the Jewish canon or Hebrew Bible

**tantra:** esoteric practices leading to moksha

**Tattvabodhini Sabha:** colonial Hindu sect in Kolkata that promoted adaptation to India's new economic and political realities

***tawhid*:** oneness of God; monotheism

**Tenrikyo:** Tenrikyo ("Religion of Heavenly Wisdom"), a Shinto sect founded sect in 1838, taught that traditional dance ritual, initiation, and daily social service were essential to salvation

***The Rule of Benedict*:** Benedict of Nursia's monastic rule known for its balance and mutual support

**theodicy:** explanation providing meaning to evil and death

**Theravada:** traditionalists; school of Buddhism dominant in South and Southeast Asia

**three faiths:** Chinese grouping of the three great traditions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism)

**Three Marks of Existence:** Characteristics of reality central to the Buddhist analysis of human reality: suffering, impermanence, and no soul

**Three Refuges:** the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha

**Tian di:** supreme overlord in Heaven believed in Han-era China to keep records on each individual soul

**tirtha:** a holy space defined by a river confluence

**Tirthankara:** great enlightened Jain Teacher, the last being Mahavira

**Torah:** translates as reception, teaching, or law and represents God's revelation and commandments; can also refer to first five books of the Hebrew Bible

**totem:** symbol taken from the natural world to represent the common origin and essence of a social group

**transcendent:** beyond all finite things

**Transcendental Meditation:** movement founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi that brought yoga meditation teachings to the West

**Trinity:** The Christian belief that the one God has inner dynamic relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

**Tu-di Gong:** "earth ruler" believed to control fertility worshipped by farmers in early China

**Tu-di Gong:** "Earth Ruler"; local god who is worshipped across modern China to control the earth's fertility

**TULIP:** representing the five points of Calvinism, standing for total depravity of the soul, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints

**tutelary spirit:** supernatural agent, often an ancestral spirit, who helps a shaman

***ulama*:** religious scholars

**ultimate reality:** that which has the highest value and meaning to a group

***ummah*:** Muslim community of believers

**Upanishads:** appendices to the Vedas that record Hindu mystical teachings

**Vaishnavite:** devotee of Vishnu

**Vajrayana/Thunderbolt Vehicle:** esoteric "vehicle" emphasizing practices that speed progress toward enlightenment

**Vedas:** collection of earliest Hindu hymns

**"Venus" figurines:** prehistoric Eurasian, small stone figures with exaggerated female characteristics

***via analogia*:** a way of explaining spiritual reality by using analogies from particular finite qualities and characteristics

***via negativa*:** a way of explaining spiritual reality by negating all finite qualities and characteristics

**vipassana meditation:** Buddhist meditation practice focusing on breath and body

**Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP):** organization of religious leaders that promotes the creation of a Hindu India

***wali*:** Sufi term referring to a saint

**white shamans:** Westerners who claim to be practitioners in a "universal" shamanic tradition

**Won Buddhism:** Korean school of Buddhism that combines Zen and Pure Land teachings

**Wu Tai Shan:** sacred mountain in China revered as home of the bodhisattva Manjushri

**wu-wei:** Daoist ideal of "noninterference"

**xiao:** Confucian ideal of filial conduct; respect for one's parents, elders, and ruler

**yarmulke:** head covering for Jewish men

**yin-yang theory:** twin, complementary forces by which the Dao is known

***Yoga Sutras*:** ancient text codifying yoga practices, attributed to Patanjali

**yoga:** "union"; practices that lead to union with the divine

***zakat*:** almsgiving

**Zen:** Mahayana school emphasizing meditation, discipline, and individual effort to reach nirvana

**Zen:** name in Japan for the Mahayana Ch'an school

**Zhu Xi:** great Neo-Confucian master who integrated elements of Buddhism and Daoism into Confucianism

***Zhuang Zi*:** the second Daoist classic text, named after a sage of this name

**Zionism:** nineteenth-century Jewish secular political movement that promoted giving Jews their own national homeland

**Zohar:** Massive Jewish biblical commentary that details full expression of kabbalistic thought

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